University of Alberta

The Politics of Plato's *Symposium*

by

Dennis Ernest Westergaard ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Political Science

Edmonton, Alberta
Fall 2005

Library and
Archives Canada

Published Heritage
Branch

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque et
Archives Canada

Direction du
Patrimoine de l'édition

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

0-494-08756-0

Your file *Votre référence*
ISBN:
Our file *Notre reference*
ISBN:

NOTICE:
The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

AVIS:
L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.

Canada

Dedication

To my family, for their support and encouragement

Abstract

This Straussian interpretation of Plato's *Symposium* argues that the dialogue as a whole provides a teaching about the erotic basis of politics. It elucidates the origin of politics, the sources of their decline, and the possibilities for their renewal. Each of the seven speeches of *Symposium* constitutes an integral part of what could thus be called the political story. This story is at bottom a story about the gods: the quality of politics ebbs and flows with the quality of the gods. The first speech depicts the erotic disposition that is necessary for politics to emerge, one which is attracted to them because they are *beautiful*. The first speech corresponds to the historically first city, where the laws and the gods that support them are accepted as unambiguously good, and the citizens equate the good with the ancestral. The second and third speeches together represent the first derogation from politics, which occurs when the shift is made from the equation of the good with the ancestral to the equation of the good with the pleasant. They undercut the gods of the city, and hence politics, by pointing to the artificial character of laws, and the reality of material nature. The fourth, fifth, and sixth speeches represent considerations of various ways to rehabilitate politics. The fourth proceeds through the rehabilitation of existing gods, the fifth through the introduction of novel gods, and the sixth through the elucidation of a natural basis for gods. For various reasons, none of these solutions to the political problem work. The solution is rather found in the seventh and final speech, Alcibiades' erotic eulogy to Socrates. This speech describes the failed philosophical education of a man who had a spectacular political career. This education altered his conception of politics, and hence the good that he could gain from them. But while it elevated him, he remained essentially and incorrigibly political. The practical political

solution depicted in *Symposium*, which is meant to be understood as the sister-solution to the impractical political solution of *Republic*, is the failed philosophic education of a great-souled man.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank my teacher, Leon Craig, for his guidance and endless patience.

Table of Contents

1 Introduction 1

2 Form and Setting of The Dialogue 11

3 Prologue 33

4 Phaedrus 39

5 Pausanius 62

6 Eryximachus 101

7 Aristophanes 146

8 Agathon 198

9 Socrates 225

10 Alcibiades 286

11 Conclusion 320

Bibliography 329

Appendix: The Seating Arrangement 335

1 Introduction

It seems to me that modern political science is inadequate, because insufficiently erotic. This claim is apt to sound strange to most people, since most people today are apt to associate eros simply with sex. But the sophisticated reader knows that there *are* two approaches to the study of politics that are motivated by an awareness of human sexuality: Freudianism and feminism. The one reduces politics down to the psychology of sex understood in the narrowest of terms, the other sees politics through the prism of a power struggle between the sexes per se. In asserting that modern political science is insufficiently erotic, I certainly do not mean to argue that politics needs to be understood in the sexual terms of either of these approaches. On the other hand, the *primary* meaning of eros as the intense attraction between members of the opposite sex that serves the purpose of procreation should never really be forgotten either. What, then, do I mean by 'erotic'? To answer this question, I look to what is arguably the most famous thing ever written on eros: Plato's *Symposium*. But *Symposium* is composed of six or seven different speeches given in praise of eros. It is thus not immediately clear that it provides an answer to that question, or to any other. *Symposium* presents at least six or seven different perspectives on eros, and as such it represents a broad range of its manifold diversity – possibly the full range. In doing so, the dialogue seems to raise more questions than answers. One may thus wonder whether there is a single teaching on the erotic things to be found there. Yet it is reasonable to assume that Plato intends the views expressed by the greatest speakers he presents to be in some sense authoritative, especially if there is agreement between these views. The two greatest men Plato presents in *Symposium* are Socrates and Aristophanes. Their views of eros are evidently very different, but they are nonetheless the same in this fundamental respect: for both, eros could be said to be the painful awareness or divination of incompleteness, and the consequent striving for wholeness. Provisionally, then, this is what I mean by the erotic.

This sort of erotic understanding no longer enjoys the widespread support it once did among people who study the nature of human beings. This is, in part, because the social sciences now aspire to a standard of science set by the so-called 'natural sciences'. The natural sciences study 'nature', by which is mainly meant material things, and the principles, or 'laws', which govern the motion of these material things. Having once understood the laws that govern the motion of material things, the natural scientist as technologist is able to manipulate material things, as Bacon famously put it, "for the relief of man's estate". The natural sciences are manifestly successful, as they have indeed been able to produce concrete results that have led to enormous material advancements in our standard of living. By contrast, the benefit to humanity of the social sciences is not so readily apparent.

It is no accident that the most successful social science, as measured by the extent of its actual contribution to the political policy process, or the money it attracts, or the honour accorded to its practitioners, is economics. Economics posits a series of laws about human behaviour, *viz.* the Law of Supply and Demand, the Law of Diminishing Returns, or the Law of Comparative Advantage, and, on this basis, is able to predict – with what must be admitted to be impressive accuracy – human behaviour in so-called 'market-economies'. Economics is seemingly the most 'scientific' of the social sciences, being the most 'mathematized', and most successful in predicting, and is thus the social science that can make the strongest case for the social benefits that it can plausibly claim to produce. Most practitioners in the other social sciences understand this, and try to be similarly 'scientific' as a result. But 'economic man' – a 'marginal utility maximizer' – is flat, narrow, practically unidimensional, being utterly abstracted from the manifold dimensions of eros. The effort to be more scientific after the fashion of the economist bespeaks an inadequate understanding among social scientists as to the nature of the phenomenon they study. As Aristotle said, one must not try to impose more precision on a subject matter than it will admit of. Economics succeeds in the scientific manner in which it does because, of all the social sciences, it is the one that is most directly related to what could be justly called the 'material' dimension of man's social existence, and because the material dimension of man's social existence has a standardized unit of measure: money. These facts accord the economist with opportunities for precision and manipulation that are simply not open to other social scientists.

The social sciences are 'compartmentalized' into various specialized disciplines, such as political science, economics, anthropology, and so forth, each of which is further divided into a number of still more specialized 'fields'. There is both a denigrating and an approving interpretation of this state of affairs. The denigrating view is that by specializing, the social sciences are simply aping the natural sciences. Whereas the 'officially approved' rationale is that social phenomena – even the essential social phenomena – are far too complex to be fully apprehended by a single discipline, much less by a single individual. They can thus only be fully apprehended by a collectivity of specialists. It is implicit in this rationale that our specialization makes us collectively wise, rather than individually wise. But the specialized structure of the social sciences has the effect of hiding from view the whole human, because it discourages the very effort to attain a view of the whole human. Specialization may be said

> to *originate* ultimately in this premise: in order to understand a whole, one must analyse or resolve it into its elements, one must study the elements by themselves, and then one must reconstruct the whole or recompose it by starting from the elements. Reconstruction requires that the whole be sufficiently grasped in advance, prior to the analysis. If the primary grasp lacks definiteness and breadth, both the analysis and the synthesis will be guided by a distorted view of the whole, by a figment of a poor imagination rather than by the thing in its fullness. And the elements at which the analysis arrives will at best be only some of the elements. The sovereign rule of specialization means that the reconstruction cannot even be attempted. The reason for the impossibility of reconstruction can be stated as follows: the whole as primarily known is an object of common sense; but it is of the essence of the scientific spirit, at least as this spirit shows itself within the social sciences, to be distrustful of common sense or even to discard it altogether.[1]

Rampant specialization leads, in the case of the human being at any rate, only to greater irrelevancy and confusion. It would be far better to have a social science that teaches its practitioners to develop skill in attaining the view of the whole. For only in light of a comprehensive understanding of human nature can the 'incompleteness' of the individual human be recognized, and its implications examined.

This leads back to my initial point: modern political science is inadequate, because insufficiently erotic. It is my contention that the recognition, and consequent careful study, of Plato's *Symposium* as a vitally important document of political science would make the discipline more attentive to the erotic character of political life.[2] Of course, to say that modern political science is inadequately erotic assumes that a more erotic political science (such as, for example, that of the ancients) would be an improvement. But why should we think so? There are at least two related reasons: first, because political phenomena are essentially erotic, and second, because making political science more erotic would serve to counter the disturbing narrowness of specialization. I will discuss the latter point first. If eros can be understood, as I have indicated, as the painful awareness of incompleteness and the consequent striving to be whole, then it is, by its very nature, contra specialization. The six or seven speeches in praise of eros Plato presents in *Symposium* represent six or seven different perspectives on eros. With these six or seven speeches, Plato presents us with what amounts to an *analysis* of eros; for each speech is born of a *partial* perspective, i.e., each speech corresponds to a *part* of eros. He thus frustrates the specialist, for the primary skill of the specialist is precisely the analytical skill, which in each case has already been applied. Thus, analysis is *not* what is required to understand the dialogue – and eros – as whole. This is not to say that one need not further analyse the speeches, only that it is more important to see how they fit together. Plato has, with his *Symposium*, in effect laid down a challenge: having provided six or seven analyses, he obliges the reader to provide the synthesis – the synthetic perspective of Plato himself.[3]

---

[1] Leo Strauss "Social Science and Humanism" in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss* ed., Thomas L. Pangle, 4 (my italics).

[2] Of course, it is implicit in this contention that the required study of Plato's *Symposium*, or any of the Platonic dialogues, or indeed any of the classic political thinkers, is not an

---

essentially antiquarian exercise (although such study may indeed be of antiquarian value). To rephrase, what is most needed is not that we learn *about* Plato, but rather that we learn *from* Plato. This, of course, assumes that Plato has something to offer us, which assumption is apt to seem incredible to us moderns because he lived and wrote millennia ago. If ancient Plato does have something to offer us moderns, then it must be the case that he perceived something of permanent human value (else he would be simply irrelevant), something the discovery of which could justify and repay the difficult labour involved in seriously studying his works. But this argument runs counter to the prevailing historicist-relativist orthodoxy of the social sciences, which holds that there are no permanent or universal truths of a specifically social character. Seriously to study Plato, to learn from him, one must put aside – at least for the moment – prevailing orthodoxies in order to interact directly with his dialogues rather than through the mediating and distorting effect of these orthodoxies. For an excellent discussion and elaboration of these points, see Allan Bloom "The Study of Texts" in *Giants and Dwarfs: Essays, 1960 – 1990.*

[3] Perhaps every dialogue has this character, for

> arriving at an adequate interpretation of a dialogue requires one to think synoptically, synthesizing disparate evidence into a single coherent vision of the whole. And

The distinction between analysis and synthesis can be expressed in terms of human nature as follows. Some minds seem to be naturally drawn to the analytical skill – to seeing distinctions and taking things apart. Whereas other minds are more naturally adept at and inclined to synthesizing – to seeing commonalities and so drawing things together as wholes. The difference is more or less captured in Pascal's distinction between *l'esprit de géométrie* and *l'esprit de finesse. L'esprit de géométrie* is cold and calculating, and uninterested in personalities or their emotions and feelings, hence numb to most of what really moves people. Its *forté* is to provide clarification as to details pertinent to the parts. *L'esprit de finesse* is warm and intuitive, and – being sensitive to emotions and feelings – it grasps in a single breath the erotic wholes that move people. Today's social scientist reaches purposefully for *l'esprit de géométrie.* The social sciences as a whole thus end up producing a clarified view of the parts, but a confused view of the whole, whereas what we desire as human beings is precisely a clarified view of the whole.

The small amount of work done on *Symposium* in the social sciences tends to be analytical. It is generally characterized by the fact that the speeches tend to be seen as vehicles for the presentation of so many theories, each to be considered in relative isolation from each other as well as from their artistic context. What typically arise from this approach are interpretations of the dialogue generated mainly through techniques of logical or 'metaphysical' analysis. The problem with this approach is that one thus tends to ignore the larger dramatic setting of the speeches, and in particular the dialectical relations among them.[4] One may even ignore the essential fact that the speeches are given in *praise* of eros, i.e., the fact that the speeches are indeed eulogies.

Being eulogies, the speeches are primarily rhetorical, and not *complete* accounts. They are *not* 'treatises on love' that can be parsed and analysed with exclusively logical methods. They are intended to entertain, impress and persuade; they are, above all else, rhetorical displays. Now, the elements of rhetoric, as laid out in Aristotle's treatise on rhetoric are, *ethos, pathos,* and *logos*. On the classical view, rhetoric succeeds insofar as

---

synthetic thought is the *sine qua non* of political philosophy. (Leon Craig *The War Lover: A Study of Plato's* Republic xxvi)

[4] For a representative collection of interpretations of Plato that have this character, see *The Philosophy of Socrates: A Collection of Critical Essays* Gregory Vlastos, ed.

it makes a *psycho*logical and *not* primarily a logical appeal. Hence, subjecting *Symposium* simply to logical analysis is necessarily inadequate since the effectiveness of what the speeches convey is not simply a function of logic.[5] It is consequently imperative for the analytically inclined reader to be alive to the drama, to cultivate *l'espirit de finesse*, even if for no other reason than for the sake of an adequate analysis. For the drama of the dialogue *always* either expands on, or qualifies, or in some way modifies the arguments that are presented within it. To be true to the dialogue, the analytically minded reader is thus forced to synthesize its disparate elements into a single, unified, and coherent view of the whole. Correctly understood, analysis and synthesis are really two aspects of a single skill, the dialectical skill of philosophy, and properly to engage the dialogue is to develop this skill. What is really needed is a reading of *Symposium*, as with all dialogues, that sees them as philosophical artistry.[6]

The reason for the relative neglect of Plato's *Symposium* among modern social scientists, and especially among modern political scientists, follows from the fact that the political significance of eros – or, more precisely, of man's erotic nature – is not adequately apprehended. Being insufficiently attuned to the political significance of man's erotic nature, modern political science is thus also insufficiently attentive to the political significance of beauty (or, conversely, of ugliness). This negligence itself contributes to a prejudice against the possibility that serious political science could actually be conveyed through art or poetry, and hence to the relative neglect of Plato's poetical masterpiece, *Symposium*.

---

[5] Moreover, it is implicit in this particular approach that if Plato had been smarter or somehow more advanced than he was, he would not have written dialogues. But if we are to take Plato seriously, then we must assume that he knew what he was doing, and that the dramatic form of the dialogue is not disposable but is itself an integral part of the teaching.

[6] In recent years, more scholarship recognizing *Symposium* as such has begun to emerge. I have found *Leo Strauss: On Plato's Symposium* ed., Seth Benardete, and Allan Bloom's essay "The Ladder of Love" in his *Love and Friendship* to be simply invaluable. Stanley Rosen's *Plato's Symposium* is always thought-provoking, although I often find myself in disagreement with him on basic interpretive issues. And I have often had occasion to consult Leon Craig's *The War Lover*. Although this book is a study of Plato's *Republic*, because of the very close relationship between these two dialogues (briefly discussed below), the author's perspicacious insights into *Republic* always seem pertinent in some way. The book also contains a wealth of good advice on how to read Plato, which is of course directly relevant to the study of any dialogue. In addition, I was fortunate enough to have participated in a seminar given by him on Plato's *Symposium* in Winter, 1998, at the University of Alberta, which has contributed much to the present study.

To illustrate, in common sense terms, the essentially erotic character of political phenomena, one could probably do no better than consider Plato's *Republic*, a dialogue which presumably requires no defence as an important document of political science. In *Republic*, Socrates engages a few politically promising young men in discussion about the nature of justice. The dialogue shows that observable political life is simply unintelligible apart from justice. In *Republic*, a City in Speech is built up by the interlocutors from 'first principles' so as to see its justice and injustice coming into being (369a-b),[7] which is as much as rationally to see the origin of justice and injustice in any and all actual cities. The City in Speech develops at every step in response to some identifiable need. These are all initially material needs of the body, and the city so constructed turns out to be a collection of male artisans working to satisfy each other's material needs. This city presumably reaches its completion when there are enough artisans in it to satisfy all the material requirements of the body in an efficient manner (369c-371e). Once this seems to have been accomplished, Socrates asks Adeimantus: "Where in it, then, would justice and injustice be? Along with which of the things we considered did they come into being?" To which Adeimantus responds: "I can't think, Socrates, unless it's somewhere in some need these men have of one another" (371e-a).[8] The question never is explicitly answered. Instead, Socrates starts to describe their life together – a simple, rather pointless sort of a life of working, sleeping, eating, and singing – which provokes Glaucon to interrupt, derisively calling this City in Speech a City of Pigs (372d). We can infer from the lack of an answer to Socrates' question that whatever justice there may be in the City of Pigs, it is not a source of controversy or discord. Like animals, the men of the City of Pigs are preoccupied with material needs, and the City of Pigs has been constructed to satisfy these with efficiency.

---

[7] Bracketed alpha-numeric references correspond to Stephanus pagination, which can be found with nearly all translations of the Platonic dialogues. I do not provide line numbers as I do not see the need for such precision: the meaning of the reference only becomes clear in context.

[8] I will abbreviate all references to Stephanus pagination wherever there is no possibility of resulting confusion. Hence, 371e-a means 371e-372a.

But real people – men and women – also have *erotic* needs. The actual city answers to these needs as well as to merely economic needs. Erotic needs are every bit as important to the foundation of the city as are the economic needs which the City of Pigs is designed to meet, and, indeed, probably more so, as can be seen by the fact that the 'male only' City of Pigs would not last more than a generation. Whereas, the mere mention of women raises the problem of discord among men. Hence, for Aristotle, the very first community upon which the city is founded is not a community of artisans but rather the natural community of man and woman (*Politics*, 1.2). A response to Socrates' question can be reasonably inferred from the need that the interlocutors glaringly failed to consider: justice and injustice come into being in the city along with the *erotic* need human beings have of one another. The problem of justice in the city, i.e., the real political problem, originates in man's erotic nature.

To carry the insights of *Republic* as to the essentially erotic character of political phenomena a bit further, the reason that the problem of justice in the city originates in man's erotic nature is that eros is a threat to the city because it knows no bounds other than its own particular needs and satisfactions. Consequently, it derogates from every common understanding of justice, and some form of 'common understanding' is what justice in the city requires. Eros as such is lawless, or at any rate follows its own 'laws', which give rise to the need for laws of human design. Left unregulated, eros can lead to the most odious crimes, including incest, sacrilege and murder (571c-d), because it is apt to instil in individuals a psychic regime akin to insolence and licentiousness (402e-a). Left unchecked, it is inconsistent with happy city life (458d), and so naturally tends to undermine civic order in general. It thus tends toward the lawless states of anarchy and tyranny (574d-578a). The laws governing eros, and in particular the marriage laws, keep this threat to the city at bay. They are thus literally foundational, and inevitably colour the quality of all the laws, and hence of the entire city. But while eros poses a grave threat to the city, it is an inescapable threat since eros remains essential to the city's continued existence: the erotic relationships between the sexes being the sole practical source for a continuous supply of citizens and other inhabitants – the only other alternative being the systematic 'kidnapping' of the products of other people's erotic relationships. Indeed, this replenishment of composing individuals is the single most vital requirement of any and all actual cities, a precondition for their continued existence.

When erotic matters are finally explicitly addressed in Book V of *Republic*, Socrates, who is obviously aware of this problem, seeks to turn it to advantage: if the city needs a continuous supply of human beings, then why not arrange erotic matters such that it not only gets this supply, but gets the very best possible supply? After all, this is what we do with the other animals:

> Soc.: "I see hunting dogs and quite a throng of noble cocks in your house. Did you, in the name of Zeus, ever notice something about their marriages and procreation?"
> Glauc.: "What?" he said.
> Soc.: "First, although they are all noble, aren't there some among them who are and prove to be best?"
> Glauc.: "There are."
> Soc.: "Do you breed from all alike, or are you eager to breed from the best as much as possible?
> Glauc.: "From the best."
> Soc.: "And what about this?" From the youngest, or from the oldest, or as much as possible from those in their prime?"
> Glauc.: "From those in their prime."
> Soc.: "And if they weren't so bred, do you believe that the species of birds and that of dogs would be far worse for you?"
> Glauc.: "I do," he said. (459a-b)

Thus is introduced the elaborate eugenics program of *Republic*. Socrates proposes that we breed human beings to the same good effect as we breed cocks and dogs.

The logic of this proposal is impeccable, inasmuch as it rests on valid analogies between the three animals: all three procreate, have individual specimens that are apparently superior to others of the same species, and would be manifestly improved if only the best of the species were allowed to procreate. Thus, in the City in Speech as modified by the paradoxical provisions of Book V, eros is managed by the rulers with mathematical precision for the purpose of producing the very best human beings for the city. Eros manifested in sexual reproduction is allowed into the city, but is controlled for the good of the city. Because exercising complete control turns out to he practically impossible, attempting to do so seems ridiculous. This is what makes Book V of

Republic, which is all about politically impossible proposals, a political comedy. Book V of *Republic* gives a rough sketch of the kind of control that would be necessary in order to neutralize the threat of eros and make it unambiguously beneficial for the city. In showing the problems associated with eros, and especially the limitations that it imposes upon the political, *Republic* complements the eulogistic portrayal of eros found in *Symposium*. What the comedy of Book V shows us is that the political possibilities are decisively limited in view of our erotic natures, or that the boundary of the city is formed by our erotic natures, i.e., our erotic natures essentially define the political.

In what follows, I argue that if one attends to the political in the speeches of *Symposium*, and in the dialogue as a whole, one sees that the dialogue provides a teaching about the erotic basis of politics. It elucidates the origin of politics, the sources of their decline, and the possibilities for their renewal. Each of the seven speeches constitutes an integral part of what could thus be called the political story, a story for the ages.

2 Form and Setting of The Dialogue

Plato titled his poetic masterpiece *Symposium*, which literally means 'drinking together'. This fact merits careful consideration.[9] The title refers to an assembly of men. The only other Platonic dialogue of which this can be said is *Republic*, which is an inadequate translation of the Greek *politeia*. *Politeia* is based on the Greek *polis*, which means 'city', the natural social group "containing all that is necessary for the development and exercise of the human powers".[10] The *politeia* is the heart of the *polis*, it is the way of life of the city. The way of life of a city is established by nothing so much as by those who rule it. *Politeia* can be taken to mean, then, the ruling class of the city. The two titles, though the same in that they refer to assemblies, refer to two seemingly very different types of assemblies: men assembled for the purpose of drinking together, and men assembled for the purpose of ruling the city. But according to the central thesis of *Republic*, the only real solution to political ills lies in the Philosopher-King (473c-e), i.e., in the rule of wisdom, which implies that the assembly of men that now rules the city is not wise. In the absence of wisdom, the city is ruled by hopes and fears, pleasures and pains. It is, in a sense, made drunk with these things. The men of the *politeia* are drunk with hopes and fears, pleasures and pains, much as the men of the symposium are drunk with wine. *Symposium* is an apt metaphor for the city (cf. *Laws* 649d-e).[11]

---

[9] Not least because affixing the title is the only time in the dialogue when Plato unambiguously speaks in his own voice. As Leo Strauss explains: "While everything said in the Platonic dialogues is said by Plato's characters, Plato himself takes full responsibility for the titles of the dialogues." Leo Strauss *City and Man* 55.

[10] Allan Bloom "Interpretive Essay" in his translation *The Republic of Plato* 439.

[11] Strauss explains the metaphor as follows:

> In order to be properly practiced, drinking must be done in common, i.e., in a sense in public, so that it can be supervised. Drinking, even drunkenness, will be salutary if the drinkers are ruled by the right kind of man. For a man to be a commander of a ship, it is not sufficient that he possess the art or science of sailing; he must also be free from seasickness. Art or knowledge is likewise not sufficient for ruling a banquet. Art is not sufficient for ruling any association and in particular the city. The banquet is a more fitting simile of the city than is the ship ('the ship of state'), for just as the banqueteers are drunk from wine, the citizens are drunk from fears, hopes, desires, and aversions and are therefore in need of being ruled by a man who is

The title appears to be a fitting one for this dialogue, as it tells the story of a seminal symposium. This symposium happened long ago, and the reader comes to know of it by overhearing people talking about it. Apparently, there is a general interest in it,[12] and it is of interest for the erotic speeches given there, and the world-historical personages in attendance.[13] Not much is confidently known about this symposium, and people are trying to piece together a wide variety of conflicting information about it in order to arrive at a complete and coherent account of it. One wonders if this is essentially the way that political history is written. If it is, one wonders again whether anything politically salutary could emerge from it, or whether that would rather require an account informed by a more unified purpose. In the end, the account we get comes from a rather paltry sort of man named Apollodorus, although he does claim to have ratified it with higher authorities.

The erotic speeches given at this symposium comprise over nine tenths of the whole *Symposium* (as determined by simply counting the number of Stephanus pages which are dedicated to them of the total). The theme of the dialogue thus seems to be

---

sober. ("Plato" in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten essays by Leo Strauss* ed. Hilail Gilden, 232-233)

[12] Plato manages to create this impression with the most remarkable economy. We learn in the first few lines of the dialogue of seven people who have been talking about the party (our narrator Apollodorus, the 'comrade' to whom he tells the story, 'someone else', Phoenix, Glaucon, Aristodemus and Socrates), and who prefigure the seven speakers of the symposium. Apollodorus says he is ready to tell the story to the comrade because he has just told it the other day to Glaucon. Glaucon, for his part, needed to get the story straight, because he had received some bad information from 'someone else', who had in turn been informed by Phoenix. As it turns out, Phoenix got the story from the same person as Apollodorus – Aristodemus – although Apollodorus claims to have verified the accuracy of the story with Socrates. It seems as though everybody is talking about this symposium (172a-173d).

[13] As we see from the first question we hear on the subject: "Apollodorous, why, it was just now that I was looking for you; I had wanted to question you about Agathon's party – the one at which Socrates, Alcibiades, and the others were then present at dinner together – to question you about the erotic speeches" (172a-b). It is not clear what is of greater interest here: what was said, or who it was that said it. The general interest in the symposium has the effect of focusing our attention on it as an object of inquiry in its own right. It is important to try to 'get interested' in the symposium the same way as are the people we overhear talking about it – as an especially memorable *event*.

eros.[14] Because this theme is conveyed to us through the story of the symposium, the symposium becomes in effect a kind of representation of eros. At first, the one questioning Apollodorus knows where the symposium occurred (in the home of Agathon), but nothing at all of when. This matter is quickly cleared up: it occurred the night after the poet Agathon's first victory in the city's tragedy contest (173a).[15] This information establishes the date of the symposium at 416.[16] It is about a year before the Sicilian expedition, a military venture of a size and splendour never before attempted by man. As such, it occurs at the zenith of Athenian political greatness, or, at any rate, the last moment of that greatness.[17] This is the political *mise en scène* against which the story of the symposium occurs. But whereas we know with certainty where and when the symposium occurred, we lack certainty as to where and when the dialogue recounting it occurs.[18] Now every actual political situation or circumstance occurs at a specific time and a specific place, and to know about it with certainty would thus require knowledge of its time and date.[19] The symposium is thus a politically defined event, which is conveyed to us in a politically ambiguous medium. Given that the symposium serves as a representation of eros in this dialogue, one wonders if *human* eros is like that, i.e., if it becomes fully actual only in an actual political setting. Of course, this is an implication of the idea that man is by nature a political animal (Aristotle *Politics* 1253a7-a18).[20]

---

[14] It should, however, be noted that the traditional subtitle of *Symposium* is not 'On Eros' (that dialogue is *Phaedrus*), but rather 'On the Good'. While these subtitles are probably not actually Plato's, they are nonetheless generally helpful, having been attached by scholars who may well have had a much better understanding of the dialogues than we do, and so should be taken seriously as interpretive indicators. The subtitles usually appear with most translations of the dialogues, but only rarely with the translation of this one, presumably because modern translators simply assume it is a mistake. But it could be the case that, whereas the immediate theme of *Symposium* is 'On Eros', the larger theme is 'On the Good'. As we shall see, there is a reading of Socrates' eulogy that would support that conclusion.

The original source for these subtitles is not known. The first known reference to them is by Diogenes Laertius. In addition to the subtitles, Diogenes Laertius also lays out a complete taxonomy of the Platonic dialogues. It is perhaps of interest to note where *Symposium* falls in this taxonomy: it is of the 'instruction' family of dialogue, the 'practical' genus, and the 'ethical' species. The ethical is by far the largest species: of the thirty-six dialogues (if we include *Epistles* as one), eleven are ethical: *Apology*, *Crito*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, *Menexenus*, *Clitophon*, *Epistles*, *Philebus*, *Hipparchus* and *Lovers*.

[15] That it should be Agathon's symposium is itself of interest. A beautiful young poet throws a party for himself in celebration of his victory in a tragedy contest the day before. Is there some reason why a victory banquet for a young tragedian might be an especially fitting setting for speeches in praise of eros? Moreover, given that the name of this particular tragedian – Agathon – literally means 'good one' or 'good thing', we could say that the speeches in praise of eros occur in the house of the good. This suggests a connection between speeches in praise of eros and the good, although there is some irony at work here as well: given what Socrates later demonstrates to be the foolishly beautiful and vacuous character of his speech, one suspects Agathon is more closely associated with the beautiful than the good. This causes us to reflect on the nature of the relationship between the beautiful and the good, and in particular, whether our erotic drives lead us primarily to the beautiful and only incidentally to the good.

[16] *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* Simon and Hornblower, eds., 37. All dates are BC unless otherwise indicated.

---

[17] Soon after this seminal symposium, the fortunes of philosophy would rise in Athens, whereas the fortunes of politics would decline. Socrates' great students Plato and Xenophon would write their great books, and the schools of Plato and Aristotle would be founded and endure in one form or another for centuries to come. The Athenian empire, however, would not endure: the Sicilian expedition marked the beginning of its end. The dramatic setting of the dialogue makes us wonder whether philosophical eros flourishes in an environment of political decay. Thus Hegel famously said, "The owl of Minerva flies at dusk".

[18] Although we do know roughly. It occurs somewhere in Athens, since Apollodorus, now makes it his concern "on each and every day to know whatever [Socrates] says [and] does" (172c), and Socrates never left Athens (except to fight for the city, *Crito* 52b). As regards the date, since the one questioning Apollodorus asks if Apollodorus was present at the party, he thinks it occurred recently (for Apollodorus has only recently become a Socratic hanger-on, 172b-c). But he mentions Alcibiades as present at the symposium in his question, which means that Alcibiades must be recently returned to Athens from his long exile, which occurred soon after Agathon's victory. He returned to Athens in 407, and left again in 406 (Simon and Hornblower, 54), thus establishing the approximate date of the dialogue.

[19] I have adapted this point from Leo Strauss' essay on *Republic*:

> In the *Republic*, Socrates discusses the nature of justice with a fairly large number of people. The conversation about this general theme takes place, of course, in a particular setting: in a particular place, at a particular time, with men each of whom has his particular age, character, abilities, position in society, and appearance. While the place of the conversation is made clear to us, the time, i.e., the year, is not. Hence we lack certain knowledge of the political circumstances in which this conversation about the principles of politics takes place. ("Plato", 168)

[20] I will explore this matter in greater detail in the Aristophanes section below.

The certainty about the occasion of the symposium versus the ambiguity of its dialogical setting is a part of the remarkably complex form of *Symposium*. It is not, as is the case with many of the Platonic dialogues, written as if to be performed, much like a play.[21] Neither is the story simply narrated.[22] Rather, *Symposium* is a hybrid of these two basic types: a directly acted 'frame' conveys a story that is narrated.[23] As the dialogue opens, we see an encounter between Apollodorus and an unnamed 'comrade'. The comrade wants to be told about the party, and eventually Apollodorus obliges. It is this narration that we as readers 'overhear'. As a hybrid, we could say that *Symposium* is able to draw on the strengths of each of the two basic types of dialogue. Insofar as *Symposium* is directly acted, it impresses us with an immediacy that has the effect of placing us right in the action and so engaging us directly in that action. The main strength of the narration is that it provides for valuable commentary on the action, things which we would have no way of knowing from the action alone. The narrative glosses on the story of the symposium that occur in this dialogue are few – it is often easy to forget that it is narrated – but provide very important information about the symposium (e.g., the seating arrangement). However, the complexity of *Symposium's* form goes beyond its hybrid character. For the story we hear is not an account of one who was actually at the symposium. Rather, our narrator, Apollodorus, merely heard it from someone who was there, a certain Aristodemus ('best of the people', 173a-b). Whatever we know of the symposium is based on our observation of a narration of a second-hand account.[24] This gives *Symposium* the most complex form of any dialogue in the Platonic corpus save perhaps that of *Theatetus*.

The form of a Platonic dialogue is closely interwoven with its content or substance; one does not fully understand the content apart from the form. Thus always one of the major interpretive challenges for understanding a Platonic dialogue is to explain the significance of its form. If we divide the dialogues into two, those written as a narration, and those written as though to be directly acted, we could say that the latter convey a greater sense of certainty regarding the events depicted. When people tell stories, they are generally inaccurate: they miss much of importance, for various reasons; what they do catch, they embellish, skip the parts they consider boring or unimportant, and emphasize what really interests them; and, of course, people forget. Even when Socrates narrates, we cannot be certain that the events he narrates happen exactly as he says, for he *always* tailors his words to fit the psyche of to whomever he is speaking, and the dialogic circumstances under which he is speaking. This uncertainty surrounding the events of the narrated dialogues is itself a part of their drama, which, as such, requires interpretation. If the narrated dialogues generally convey some sense of uncertainty surrounding the events narrated, this is *especially* true of *Symposium*. For although Apollodorus claims to have ratified the details of his story with Socrates (173b), the fact of the double narration (i.e., a narration of a narration, the first by Aristodemus, then passed on by Apollodorus) gives us cause to doubt what we hear. If we think about it, we realize that between these two men, large amounts of the 'true' story (i.e., the story we would have had had Plato chosen to present the party in a directly performed manner) must have been lost. This realization is ratified by several comments Apollodorus includes in the course of recounting what he heard, reminding us that the story is neither complete nor perfectly accurate (e.g., 174e-a, 178a, 180c and 223c-d). In this way, Plato gives us to understand that the account of the symposium that he has created for us is of an uncertain and incomplete quality. Inasmuch as this account is uncertain, it endows the account of the symposium with an air of mystery, which causes us to wonder if there is something about eros that requires mystery in order for it to exist..[25] Inasmuch as this account is incomplete, it causes us to wonder if eros is essentially incomplete.

---

[21] Examples of this type of dialogue include *Hipparchus*, *Minos*, *Cleitophon*, *Theages*, *Alcibades I* and *II*, *Laches*, *Hippias Lesser* and *Greater*, *Ion*, *Phaedrus*, *Euthyphro*, *Apology of Socrates*, *Crito*, *Meno*, *Gorgias*, and *Laws*.

[22] Examples of this type of dialogue include *Republic* and *Lovers*.

[23] Other dialogues like this are *Theatetus* and *Protagoras*.

[24] Thus, it is 'third from the truth', which is what Socrates says of poetry in his critique of it in *Republic* Book X (597e). This would seem to suggest that we are to reflect on the sense in which our account is poetry.

---

[25] The implication of this would seem to be that we can never really know the truth about it, as it must remain – to use Nietzschean language – wrapped in an enveloping shroud of mystery. Consider, for example, the following from his *Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*:

> All living things require an atmosphere around them, a mysterious misty vapour; if they are deprived of this envelope, if a religion, an art, a genius is condemned to

---------- * ---------- * ----------

The account of eros given in *Symposium* might be thought to be incomplete inasmuch as only men are present at the symposium. One might explain the absence of women in this, as in other Platonic dialogues, by the fact that both politics and philosophy have traditionally been regarded as the domain of men, i.e., the absence of women is dictated by dramatic realism.[26] But the full explanation cannot be so simple. One gets the impression through continual reading of the Platonic dialogues that relations between men are – at least potentially – somehow higher or of a better quality than heterosexual relations. The assumption that, I think, ultimately underpins this, and which is especially evident in this particular dialogue, is that men have a greater capacity for both politics and philosophy. This is likely to strike a rather jarring note in the modern ear, and certainly anybody who would today attempt openly to defend such a view would be exposed to widespread opprobrium. I will not attempt to defend it here, but I would like to point out that the currently reigning views about the sexes are *always* part, perhaps even the most important part, of what Plato presented in *Republic* as the Cave of political orthodoxy (lit., 'correct opinion'). There, he presented philosophy as the escape from this cave (Book VII, in whole). We can take it, then, that the Platonic dialogues as a whole are intended to be liberating. But if they are to be liberating, we have to accept their challenge at least to consider our deepest held 'orthodoxies' in a genuinely critical fashion. The problem of the sexes is forced upon us by both *Republic* and *Symposium*. We either have to engage the problem or ignore what the dialogues say. If there were indeed a difference between the sexes in terms of their respective capacities

---

> revolve as a star without atmosphere, we should no longer be surprised if they quickly wither and grow hard and unfruitful... But every nation too, indeed every human being that wants to become *mature* requires a similar enveloping illusion, a similar protective and veiling cloud (in *Frederich Nietzsche: Untimely Meditations* Daniel Breazeale, ed., R. J. Hollingdale, transl.)

[26] We cannot infer from the simple fact of this absence, however, that Plato was either insufficiently aware of or interested in their existence. Quite to the contrary, I would argue that he demonstrates, through the words of his characters, a remarkably profound understanding of women and the feminine. One sees in the Platonic dialogues a special concern for the problem of the sexes, or the nature of the relationship between men and women and its political significance.

for politics and philosophy, it seems likely it would have something to do with their respective erotic natures. *Symposium*, which is mainly composed of speeches in praise of eros, should be a useful tool in trying to work through this problem. But if we are genuinely to try to do so, we must be open, at least provisionally, to different viewpoints – especially, perhaps, viewpoints which are opposed to our own, such as the one which the men of *Symposium* apparently hold: that of male superiority.

Nevertheless, in all fairness, it must be conceded that the absence of women in *Symposium* would seem to point towards a major problem.[27] The erotic theme is clear enough from the fact of the eulogies, but do we not have reason to doubt that the treatment of this theme could be sufficient in the absence of the female perspective? If there were some one subject for which – to a greater degree than any other subject – it was of vital importance that both sexes should contribute understanding, this surely would be it. The problem of human eros is possibly the very paradigm of all problems where the perspective of both sexes must be incorporated into the consideration of the problem. The absence of the female perspective, or a woman's eulogy at the symposium, is thus a seemingly glaring omission and obvious defect of the dialogue. Moreover, the problem would seem to be aggravated by the fact that, though some of the eulogizers of *Symposium* are married, their speeches are (where they deal with erotic relationships between people) primarily preoccupied with relationships between males. The homoerotic quality of the dialogue seems to cut women out of the picture entirely.

There are different ways one might respond to this problem. First of all, the absence of women can be seen as a kind of challenge, and the problem created by it one of Plato's pedagogic devices. We have to wonder, every time a man says something about eros: what difference does it make that he is a man? What would a woman say? Seriously to consider such questions is at once to learn about human eros and the problem of the sexes. In effect, the reader must try to supply the omission. It is similar with the issue of homosexuality. Every time some claim is made about homosexual relations, or some aspect of them is praised, we must always try to translate the claim or praise into heterosexual terms. And again, we must always ask: what difference does it make if the erotic relations are hetero- or homosexual? In working through these exercises, the reader learns a great deal about the erotic basis of political life.

---

[27] This seems to be the core of the feminist critique of Plato. For a survey of feminist critiques of Plato, see *Feminist Interpretations of Plato* ed. Nancy Tuana.

Secondly, it is not so clearly the case that there is no feminine perspective at the symposium, for one is introduced in the person of Socrates' claimed teacher in erotic matters: the 'high priestess' of love, Diotima.[28] She is one of Plato's most memorable characters. And, at least judging from most commentaries on *Symposium*, her input is the most important of all. As the (alleged) teacher of Socrates, we see her as the highest authority on the erotic things. So, far from being denied, the importance of the feminine perspective – or at least *this* feminine perspective – is actually underscored and insisted upon. Moreover, the manner in which she appears in *Symposium* – in dialogue with Socrates – is instructive. For if it is indeed the case that human eros is the very paradigm of the problem wherein the perspective of both sexes must be incorporated into the consideration of the problem, then *Symposium* actually shows us how this is to be done: through a dialogue between the sexes, the quality of which is exemplified by Socrates and Diotima.

---

[28] It could be objected that this does not really address the issue, since she is not actually at the symposium, but is rather only a creation of Socrates, in the sense that he introduces her and talks about her, and so whatever we know of her comes from him. But the exact same thing could be said of every Platonic character in relation to Plato. None of the characters are actually 'at the symposium' – the whole thing is a work of fiction. Diotima stands to Socrates exactly as does Socrates to Plato. (Which, incidentally, tells us something about Plato's creative activity. I will have more to say on this matter in the *Socrates* section below.) The ultimate source of all the characters is Plato, and so the woman Diotima is in a sense as much present as are the men. Moreover, the woman is probably introduced in the only way that she could be, for consider the effect of placing her 'at the symposium'. Men and women speak differently when they find themselves in the company of other individuals of the same sex than they do when they find themselves in mixed company. The presence of a woman would inevitably change the character of the symposium, and most likely affect the substance of the eulogies to eros. The question is whether such a presentation would have as much or any pedagogical value. It is more difficult to speak of erotic things in mixed company, because our sense of shame gets in the way. Nor would it be useful for Plato to show us men and women at a party who had 'overcome' this sense of shame, for it is perfectly natural and is itself part of the puzzle of human eros. It is hard to imagine a party full of many Socrateses and Diotimas talking about eros. The real problem here is whether or not Plato, a man, is capable of understanding and presenting the feminine psyche true to form. This is obviously a weighty problem, and I will address it more fully in the *Socrates* section below, but here I simply observe that there is no *a priori* reason to assume Plato is not capable.

What turns on the issue would seem to be nothing less than the possibility of wisdom, or, at any rate, 'human wisdom'. At his capital trial, Socrates maintains that he is not wise, but he does indeed admit to having 'human wisdom' (*Apology*, 20d with 29b). At this symposium, he makes the remarkable claim to have "[expert] knowledge of nothing but erotics" (177d). It is possible to reconcile what he says at his trial and at this symposium only if human wisdom is integral to knowledge of erotic things. Human wisdom would then involve knowledge of human eros, and if a full understanding of human eros does indeed require both the masculine and feminine perspectives, then the possibility of an individual attaining human wisdom requires the development of both these perspectives.

---------- * ---------- * ----------

But the dialogue does indeed have a predominantly homoerotic quality. In order to understand *Symposium*, a consideration of the implications of this is necessary. There are two couples present at the party: Phaedrus and Eryximachus, Agathon and Pausanius (177a-d and 193b; *Protagoras* 315c-e; *Phaedrus* 268a). Since *Protagoras* identifies both couples as together when Agathon (the mature host in *Symposium*) was just a lad, we can take it that they are long-standing couples. When any one of these men eulogizes eros, then, it only makes sense that he should speak with his lover/beloved especially in mind. It is not unlikely that he should even say things in praise of eros that he does not actually believe to be true for this very reason. At any rate, it is highly unlikely that he would say anything in praise of eros that might antagonize his partner. This dramatic feature of the dialogue thus bears directly on the substance of the eulogies.

The connection between these four men points to an intriguing subtext for the story of the symposium, upon which I will now elaborate. When Socrates and Aristodemus set out together for Agathon's party, Socrates gets lost in his thoughts along the way, and moves off by himself to pursue them. This leaves Aristodemus in the embarrassing situation of arriving uninvited at the party without his warrant for being there (174c-e). Agathon, apparently a gracious host, tries to make him feel welcome, but he was clearly hoping for Socrates and is agitated that he is not coming. During the time that he is off entranced by himself, Agathon, "often ordered that he be sent for" (175c), as though somehow Socrates was supposed to be a main attraction. Here, we must remember exactly who Agathon is: an accomplished playwright, and, as such, an adept orchestrator of both props and people, and a consummate manipulator of appearances. We get an indication of this in the interim before Socrates arrives, when Agathon says to his servants:

> Well now, boys, feast the rest of us. Though you always serve in any case whatever you want to whenever someone is not standing right over you, still now, in the belief that I, as much as the others, has been invited to dinner by you, serve in such a manner that we may praise you. (175b)

This would seem to be a staged illusion, through which Agathon creates the appearance that the servants, and not he, are in charge. He reinforces this impression by not lying on the head couch, but letting Phaedrus lie there instead, and choosing for himself the couch furthest away.[29] In noticing these points, it will perhaps not seem beyond the realm of the possible that Agathon has also orchestrated the basic plan of the evening: entertaining speeches in praise of eros that appear to be extemporary.

Of course, Agathon *appears* to have no hand in the development of this plan, he *appears* to be one who merely endorses and goes along with it. It is Pausanius who sets it up, by complaining about his hangover from yesterday's bacchanalia, and so suggesting that this evening not be one of heavy drinking (176a). Eryximachus, the doctor of the group, puts his stamp of medical approval on Pausanius' suggestion, and advises the group against drinking (176c-d). Phaedrus immediately endorses and accepts his lover's advice, and strongly suggests that the rest of the group do likewise. They fall into line (176d-e). With the way having been thus prepared, Eryximachus proposes the plan, as a kind of an offering to his beloved, which we then see executed in the remainder of the dialogue.

But as every gracious host knows, it is often best to let the guests suggest the entertainments, even if he has arranged them. If Agathon had in fact orchestrated the basic plan of the evening – entertaining speeches in praise of eros that appear to be extemporary – then he would need accomplices in order to execute his plan. Agathon's machinations would not be inconsistent with the plan having originated with Phaedrus, with him really being the 'father of the argument' (177d). Given Phaedrus' love of speeches (177a-c; *Phaedrus* 228a-c, 236d-a), it is not unlikely that he hatched the idea of speeches in praise of love, and that then Agathon saw the potential that this might create. Nor is it unlikely that Phaedrus' lover would know about the plan (and as it is he who formally proposes it, it seems rather likely that he does). Nor is it unlikely that Agathon's lover should know about it. As I noted above, it is his complaint of a hangover that sets up the whole thing. And we get a kind of a subtle confirmation of Pausanius' involvement in the plan at the end of his eulogy. Pausanius finishes his eulogy by offering it to Phaedrus as his "extemporary" contribution to eros (185b). This is an odd way to finish, for the plan of the evening calls for extemporary eulogies to eros. Why does he feel a need to emphasize the extemporary character of his? Because it is indeed *not* extemporary, and Pausanius, being nowhere near as skilled a manipulator of appearances as is his beloved, overplays his part.

---

[29] The seating arrangements are typically quite important for an evening out. It makes quite a bit of difference to the quality of the evening what sort of people you end up sitting with. We are provided with a remarkable amount of detail on this matter, and as it actually turns out to be important to the understanding of the dialogue, I have included the details of the seating arrangement as an appendix.

In order to see why Agathon would go to such elaborate lengths to orchestrate an evening of entertaining speeches that are apparently extemporaneous, one must consider what he accomplishes thereby. Anyone who was not privy to the plan ahead of time would have to produce his own eulogy extemporaneously. The effect of this is to place anyone who knows about the plan ahead of time at a considerable advantage, for anyone who knows that they will be making a speech that is intended to entertain at a party would of course prepare it. We would expect, then, that anyone who knows about the plan ahead of time would in fact deliver a much more ordered and coherent, pleasing and entertaining speech. These prepared speeches could be expected to seem more pleasing than they otherwise would, as a result of the inevitable comparisons to the 'lackluster' speeches (which is what we would expect from anyone who was not apprised of the plan ahead of time, and hence had to speak extemporaneously). Moreover, as the evening progresses, and more and more people say more and more witty and clever and charming things, the pressure builds on remaining speakers to say something witty and clever and charming that has not already been said. The plan thus places those who speak last at a significant disadvantage, as Socrates, who winds up as the very last, points out (177e). That he winds up in the last position is again something that Agathon has arranged, for when he does finally arrive, he has only one place to sit: on the last couch, next to

Agathon.[30] Agathon, second to last, would be expected to have his work cut out for him. If he could rise to the challenge, and deliver an impressive speech under these circumstances, then he would seem all the more spectacular. And he does indeed succeed: all those present applaud him vigorously (198a). Socrates would not seem to have much of a chance in this situation. We might expect his effort to look paltry by comparison, and that – especially for a man with a reputation as a good speaker – this would be a humbling experience. Moreover, Agathon could expect he would be – more so than the others, in view of his own situation of speaking last of all – especially impressed with Agathon's performance. This is, I would submit, primarily what Agathon is trying to accomplish – if that is, he has carefully staged the entire proceedings.[31]

And what is the significance of this conspiracy theory? I offer two suggestions, one pertaining to the purpose of the conspiracy, the other to its implications for the way we understand the eulogies. The conspiracy is supposed to make the ones 'in the know' look good. As I have presented the conspiracy, four of the seven speakers we hear are 'in the know', and three are 'in the dark': Aristophanes, Socrates and Alcibiades. But those three end up giving the best and most memorable speeches. The conspiracy fails. The truly extemporaneous speeches succeed. In fact, the one that ends up looking the worst of all is Agathon. If it was his show, then this must be for him a personal failure. This causes us to wonder about the role of planning versus spontaneity in erotic activity. How much erotic success is planned, and how much of it just simply 'happens', as it were, to those who are of the sort to succeed? And who are of the sort to succeed? Those who are of superior quality owing to some combination of nature and nurture. For the one thing that the conspirators could not control is how the men they kept 'in the dark' would respond to their machinations. Most responded in the hoped for fashion, with forgettable speeches (180c), but the superior men, true to form, performed brilliantly, and made hash of the conspiracy.

---

[30] See Appendix.

[31] Agathon's great attraction to Socrates is evident from his agitation over the arrival of Socrates 174e-c), his arranging things so Socrates has to sit beside him, and especially in his eagerness to lie directly next to Socrates (moving away from Alcibiades) and hear himself praised by him (223e-a).

The second point is closely related to the first. The conspirators are confident that their speeches will be most impressive because they are the prepared ones. This affects the way in which we interpret each one's speech. When one has time to think before speaking, one can carefully consider the argument, optimally arranging its parts and identifying various supporting evidence and devices. If the speech is prepared, it is thus obviously much more likely to show an argument which is as good as it can be made – or, at the least, as good as the speaker can make it. Plato could thus use a speech he meant the reader to identify as prepared as a vehicle for the best possible presentation of a perspective he wishes to elucidate.

---------- * ---------- * ----------

Because *Symposium* is constituted mainly by entertaining speeches in praise of eros, it is predominantly non-dialogical in form. This fact creates the feature of *Symposium* that is arguably its greatest interpretive challenge. The non-dialogical form of *Symposium* is apparent in many ways. The symposium is conveyed to us in a thoroughly non-dialogical fashion. The unknown comrade asks simply to be told about the night in question. There is no point in the dialogue where he interrupts and asks for clarification on any point in the account of the symposium, even though it is clear from even a superficial reading that there are many points where clarification would have been helpful, and that most people would have asked. Hence, one must suppose that either he does not wish to *discuss* it, or does not believe actual discussion to be a real option. And it is even clearer that neither does Apollodorus.[32] Rather, the listener will listen while the teller tells. But not only is the symposium conveyed to us in a thoroughly non-conversational fashion, it is itself for the most part non-conversational. It unfolds in such a way as explicitly to preclude conversation: Eryximachus establishes a strict rule for the evening, a rule to which all willingly accede, which calls for each of the men present at the party to entertain one another by each in his turn making speeches (*lógois*) for the others (177d), i.e., they are to make speeches for one another about eros;

---

[32] Apollodorus seems to have virtually no dialogical ability. The one time that we see him ask a question (173e), it is clearly one that is intended to cause an altercation. The comrade recognizes this, and turns it aside.

they are *not* to discuss (*dialégein*) it.[33] Again, one person will talk, and others will listen. This peculiar character of the evening is emphasized dramatically when Socrates first tries to question Agathon, and is firmly rebuked and his questioning is not allowed to proceed (194a-d). Everyone understands Socrates' *modus operendi*, and it will not be tolerated on this night. Finally, even when the boisterous Alcibiades bursts on to the scene and breaks the rule of the evening by refusing to eulogize eros, insisting instead on praising Socrates, he still maintains the essential form of the evening insofar as he is giving a speech to which all will listen and none will question. In quantitative terms, these non-interactive speeches constitute more than nine tenths of the total fifty-odd Stephanus pages of *Symposium*. We are for some reason denied the opportunity to witness much explicit questioning of these speeches. So the predominant mode of speech here is not what we typically associate with Socrates and philosophy – dialectic (*dialektikë*, cf. *Repuiblic* 582d) – but rather rhetoric (*rëtorikë*). How does one interact with such a non-interactive or non-dialogic dialogue?

The interpretive problem created by the non-dialogic form of the dialogue has a corollary. As noted above, the speeches of *Symposium* offer a wide variety of praises of eros, owing to the fact that the speakers exemplify a wide variety of human types.[34] The eulogies differ greatly in both method and intent – so greatly, in fact, that it is not immediately clear how they relate to one another. Each seems more or less complete unto itself: each could be abstracted from its context and stand on its own as an intelligible eulogy. Indeed, when one analyses the eulogies, one *begins* by trying to understand each on its own terms, as a complete whole unto itself. When this is noticed explicitly, the question then immediately arises: how is it that the eulogies cohere? If the eulogies to eros are to form some sort of an integral whole, then there must be some explanation of how it is that they relate to each other (other than the mere fact that they are all eulogies to eros).

Of course, an explanation for their coherence can be found in my thesis: the eulogies cohere because together they constitute integral parts of a single story about the coming into being of politics, the sources of their degeneration, and the possibilities for their renewal and return to health. But there is another explanation, one that is more directly connected to the non-dialogic form of *Symposium*. It turns out that every eulogy to eros given at the symposium is especially related to some one other. Various statements in some of the eulogizers' speeches explicitly refer to preceding speeches and so cause one to wonder how the various pairs of speakers would have actually discussed eros between themselves. They raise questions, or level criticisms, which would have triggered responses if the context had allowed for it. It is natural to wonder what these responses might have been, and on the basis of evidence provided in the dialogue about the nature of each speaker, we can conjecture responses that are more or less plausible. And since these responses would naturally call forth rejoinders, their conjecture begins a process of creating dialogues between speakers. Moreover, once one considers the connections implied by these explicit statements, further evidence linking the speeches in dialogic pairs comes to light. Consequently, one can imagine and construct the conversations between perspectives that we never actually get to see take place. By examining the paired speeches that the dialogue suggests go together, the reader can, in essence, create the dialogues that are implied.

---

[33] This is clear from the way he makes his proposal: "For it seems to me that each of us, starting on the left, should recite the fairest praise of Eros that he can" (177d).
[34] See pp. 3-4 above.

In my opinion, this creative activity constitutes a kind of education in eros. Why might one suppose that this is true? The answer to this question lies in our understanding of dialogue and its requirements. And of course, in addressing this question, one is necessarily drawn into the larger question: what *is* eros? This, in turn, is a question that is never explicitly raised in *Symposium*. The question, 'what is… ?' (*ti esti;*) is Socrates' characteristic question. Its absence here is closely connected to *Symposium's* marked absence of dialogue – to the fact that *Symposium* is such a 'non-dialogical' dialogue. The Platonic corpus as a whole shows us "*how* Socrates engaged in his most important work, the awakening of his fellow men and the attempting to guide them toward the good life which he himself was living."[35] He apparently engaged in this work predominantly, though not exclusively, through dialogue. When we meet Socrates in the various Platonic dialogues, we usually see him in conversation with his fellow man, and he is always very much in control of the conversation. His preferred type of dialogue is one characterized by short questions and answers.[36] The effective means though which he typically exerts this control are his well-chosen questions. The absence in *Symposium* of his characteristic question is consistent with its largely absent dialogue.

---

[35] Strauss, "Plato", 167, my italics.

These two points acquire a specifically erotic significance when we combine them with a third respect in which *Symposium* seems to be such an uncharacteristic dialogue: its depiction of Socrates emphatically claiming to know something, namely his remarkable claim here to have "[expert] knowledge of nothing but erotics" (177d). This claim, which must reverberate throughout the entire Platonic corpus, is striking because it stands in marked contrast to his more usual and famous claim of ignorance.[37] The claim of ignorance is famous in part because it seems to be such a wonderful instantiation of the irony we so readily associate with Socrates, for it is not credible that the man we typically see so thoroughly in control in the Platonic dialogues could be simply ignorant. One might even suspect the claim of ignorance to be patently disingenuous. The very fact that he is able at will to exert control over any dialogue shows that he must at least have expert knowledge of dialogic technique. So if his positive claim here to have expert knowledge of *nothing but* erotics is true, then it must be the case that good dialogue, the effective means of which is good questioning, is a most important part of erotics. We could thus speculate that an adequate understanding of eros is gained through an adequate understanding of sound dialogic questioning and answering. Maybe good dialogue is itself an instantiation of eros, perhaps even the highest.

However, there is only one example in *Symposium* of Socrates engaged in the kind of dialogue with which we characteristically associate him on the basis of what we see of him in the rest of the Platonic corpus: the dialogue with Agathon that immediately precedes his own eulogy (199c-201c).[38] A curious thing about this little conversation is the way in which it subtly draws our attention to the close etymological link between the Greek word for questioning (or 'to ask', 'ask for'; *erötao*) and love (*erös*).[39] Socrates asks permission from Phaedrus to question Agathon on a few small points in his speech, so that he can get him to agree. This agreement, as Socrates explains it, is to form a kind of basis or departure point for his own eulogy (cf. 199b with 201d). Phaedrus responds: "Well, I allow it, ask [*eröta*]" (199c). Shortly after Socrates says to Agathon: "Do try then, to tell about love [*éröta*] as well" (199e). The words in the form that they take here are quasi-homonyms, the only difference being a shift in accent.[40] Thus the suggestion is planted that asking and loving are of a kind, that they are both part of the erotic things (*ta erotika*). This suggestion is confirmed in Socrates' eulogy, which this Socratic conversation conveys. His eulogy is, as he says, his presentation of how he was taught the erotic things by Diotima (201d). As he presents himself in need of the kind of instruction that Diotima provides, we could say that he presents himself as lacking in the knowledge that is characteristic of him, i.e., he presents himself as pre-Socratic. In educating the pre-Socratic Socrates, Diotima converses with him in more or less the same way he has just conversed with Agathon: dialogue characterized by short questions and answers (very short at first – 201e-202e – then getting longer). The juxtaposition of Socrates' dialogue with Agathon and Diotima's dialogue with the pre-Socratic Socrates suggests that she taught Socrates how to converse. At any rate, it seems that the education he received in the erotic things proceeded most importantly through dialogue. As he presents it, he could not learn what

---

[36] For a rather comical account of this preference, see *Protagoras* 334d-336d.

[37] 'All I know is that I know nothing'. Socrates never actually said that, but it does seem to capture the spirit of his habitual stance. This case is similar to that of Machiavelli, who never actually said, 'The ends justify the means', but to whom it seems just to attribute those words nonetheless. 'All I know is that I know nothing' can be read as a paraphrase of something Socrates says at his trial (*Apology* 21d).

[38] His earlier conversation with Agathon does not qualify (194a-e), because it is cut short by Phaedrus before it really gets to any kind of conclusion. The conversation that he

---

recounts for us with Diotima would qualify, were it not for the fact that, as he presents it, she and not he is in control.

[39] For all transliterations, I will adopt the following conventions: 'o' represents short o (o-*mikron*) and 'ö' represents long o (o-*mega*), and similarly for 'e', short e (epsilon), 'ë', and long e (eta). I note here that the English word 'eros' is based on a transliteration: *erös*. Because of this, and because the word obviously must occur often in any study of *Symposium*, it would be pedantic to provide the transliteration instead of the English. Accordingly, I will do so only when it matters (as, for example, in cases where it is important to note the accentuation of the word in whatever form it occurs), or in transliterations of whole phrases.

[40] C.D.C. Reeve, 'Telling The Truth About Love: Plato's *Symposium*' in *Proceedings of The Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* John J Cleary and William C Wians, eds., 92.

she had to teach him without learning how to understand her questions. The expert on erotic things learned his expertise by way of learning how to ask people questions.

So, to return to the question 'what is eros?', i.e., to try to learn the erotic things, we too have to learn how to ask people the right questions. But this is not as easy as it might sound. Much of the pedagogy of the Platonic dialogues rests on the most remarkable ability Socrates has to draw from his interlocutors interesting contributions in conversation on the nature of things. Part of the reason he is able to do this is because he has some sense of what sort of contributions, owing to their respective psyches, they might be suited to make, i.e., he has knowledge of their souls. Knowing how to ask good questions in dialogue is not possible apart from knowledge of human souls.[41] As a practical matter, we develop these two kinds of knowledge together, and in so doing we to that extent learn about the erotic things. In my opinion, the eulogies to eros provide the reader with an opportunity to learn about eros by developing these two kinds of knowledge. I will accordingly provide, in the appropriate places in what follows, an indication of what the speakers of *Symposium* would have asked each other in dialogue about eros – given the opportunity to do so – based on my understanding of their souls, and the statements that they make referencing other speakers.

If *Symposium* teaches us about the human soul, dialogue, and eros in the manner in which I have indicated, then *Symposium* holds a special place in the Platonic corpus. For the dialogues are characteristically dialogical, and this overtly erotic dialogue teaches us about dialogue. *Symposium* must be, in effect, a kind of commentary on the Platonic corpus insofar as it has something to say – indirectly, to be sure – about the dialogical form of that corpus. Moreover, it must also teach us about how the parts of that corpus, the individual dialogues, relate to the whole. For the dialogues stand to the whole corpus as the erotic eulogies stand to the whole *Symposium*. Just as we begin with individual dialogues, and try to understand them first on their own terms, as more or less complete wholes unto themselves, so too we begin with the eulogies. And having gained some understanding of an individual dialogue, we then begin to wonder how our understanding of that dialogue might be augmented by our understanding of some other dialogue – we use our understanding of one dialogue as a basis to question a different dialogue, and in this way we unite the many different dialogues into a whole: just so, I will argue, we can unite the many different eulogies into a whole. Each of the dialogues, then, has some important relationship to all the rest, though more substantial to some than others.

---

[41] Nor apart, one might add, from knowledge of the 'nature of things'. But this points to another way to see the difference between Socrates and the pre-Socratics: for the great deficiency of the pre-Socratics was that they sought to know about the 'nature of things' without sufficient awareness of specifically human nature. As we shall see, this spirit is captured in *Symposium* with the speech of Eryximachus. What is new with Socrates, what Socrates 'brings to the table', as it were, is the focus on human nature.

This is true of *Symposium*. Though related to all the dialogues that constitute the whole of the Platonic corpus, it bears an especially close relationship to three in particular: *Phaedrus*, *Republic* and *Protagoras*. The close connection to *Phaedrus*, the dialogue traditionally subtitled 'On Eros' is probably the most readily apparent. Both are overtly erotic; both prominently showcase long rhetorical speeches about erotic matters, and – to that extent – both are non-conversational. The eponym of *Phaedrus* is the first speaker of *Symposium*. In *Phaedrus*, we see him as a man who is in love with beautiful speeches. In *Symposium*, his love of beautiful speeches in a sense begets the eulogies to eros, for Eryximachus proposes the rule of the evening – that every man is to make speeches in praise of eros – in large part to please Phaedrus. Thus, there is a sense in which Phaedrus really is the "[father] of the argument" (*logos*, 177d, cf. *Phaedrus* 257b). But whereas the erotic dialogue *Symposium* teaches us the art of dialogue and questioning,[42] the erotic dialogue *Phaedrus* seems to teach us about the art of making speeches.[43]

I have already spoken in some detail about the connection between *Symposium* and *Republic* in the introduction. I will add a few more brief comments here. *Republic* complements *Symposium* in that it fills out the partial and incomplete treatment of eros which one finds in *Symposium*. *Republic* also provides a partial and incomplete treatment of eros, but in the opposed sense. There the focus is on the dark and sinister side of eros, a force which seems to come to full in the person of the unbridled and licentious tyrant, whereas in *Symposium* the focus is on the light and happy side of eros, a force which seems to be the cause of, or associated with, everything good and beautiful. There eros is suppressed and manipulated right down to the last detail of copulation in the name of the city, here it is celebrated and given free reign in apparently total disregard of the city. This complementary quality of the two dialogues in respect of their treatment of eros suggests that the full teaching on eros is accessible only through integrating the account of both dialogues. The close connection between the dialogues is supported by a number of interesting dramatic contrasts. There the men present with Socrates are young, here they are mature, accomplished and experienced. There they are denied a promised feast by the arguments of the evening, here the speeches of the evening are a fitting complement to a feast worthy of praise. There Socrates claims himself to be unequal to the task of defending justice but does so anyway out of some sense of piety, here he shows himself to be quite equal to defending an account of eros with no apparent regard for piety. There he votes in favour of the formation of the community that will address the issue of the evening only under some apparent element of compulsion, here he freely votes in favour of it with alacrity. There he humbly (if ironically) professes ignorance, here he boldly claims expert knowledge. And in both cases, the narrator of the story is arrested from behind on his way up to town from the port, there from the new port Pireaus, here from the old port Phaleron, which might suggest that the subject matter of *Symposium* is somehow 'older'. Finally, whereas that dialogue begins yesterday, this one begins the day before yesterday, thus perhaps implying that the subject matter of *Symposium* is logically, or psychologically, prior to that of *Republic*.

---

[42] I.e., if my argument about how the eulogies relate as implied dialogues is correct.
[43] This is the subject of discussion in that dialogue from 257b to 278b.

The connection between *Symposium* and *Protagoras* is suggested by the curious fact that all the named speakers of *Symposium* are present in *Protagoras*, save for one: Aristophanes (who makes his one and only appearance in the Platonic corpus in *Symposium*). But *Protagoras* is the most transparently funny of the dialogues, and perhaps Socrates takes the place of Aristophanes in that dialogue. Both dialogues have very complex forms, with a briefly acted prologue conveying a narrated story. There Socrates criticizes the eponym for introducing poetry into the discussion, likening conversation about poetry to the drinking parties of the vulgar, who – because of their lack of education and inability to entertain themselves with their own speeches – hire flute girls so they can listen to flute voices instead of their own. At a drinking party of gentlemen, he says, they dismiss the flute girls, and instead entertain themselves with one another's speeches, speaking and listening in good order, even after they have had a lot to drink. They leave the poets (who cannot in any event be questioned) alone so that they can instead test one another with arguments (347c-348a). This criticism seems clearly designed to make us think about the party of *Symposium*. This party is somewhat like the party of gentlemen Socrates describes in *Protagoras*: it is a gentlemen assembly that does indeed dismiss the flute girl (*Symposium* 176e), and they do indeed choose instead to speak and listen in good order. But it is also different: while these men speak and listen in good order, they do not really test one another by giving and taking arguments. Their speeches are, in effect, intended like the works of the poets, i.e., as beautiful and pleasing works that are more to be admired and enjoyed than questioned.

One of the main explicit themes of *Protagoras* is what exactly constitutes a sophist, and the difference between the sophist and philosopher is a theme that is implicit in the dialogue as a whole insofar as it shows us sophist and philosopher in action. This insight is helpful at several points in *Symposium*, and, in general, *Protagoras* helps us to understand the sophistical element in the eulogies. This is important because the plan of the evening, speeches in praise of eros, is – given the fact that lovers and beloveds speak in the presence of their partners – a virtual invitation to sophistry. To understand the eulogies, it is useful to understand when the men are saying things that they really do believe to be true, and when they are saying things merely to make themselves look good and persuade and impress others.

3 Prologue

The first word of Symposium is *dokö*, which means 'I seem'. The dialogue starts with a statement of seeming: "I seem to me not unprepared concerning that about which you ask" (172a). As "the beginning is the most important part of any work," especially in matters of education (*Republic* 376c-b), we need to pay especially close attention to this beginning. The issue of how things seem will be especially important in understanding eros (as will the contrast between how things seem and how things really are).

The one who expresses this statement of seeming is Apollodorus, whose name literally means 'gift of Apollo'. As he is an entirely fictional character of Plato's creation,[44] and as he narrates our account of the symposium, we can take it that Plato intends for the reader to consider this account as a gift of Apollo. Apollo is the most Greek of the Greek gods; the most famous Greek oracle was at Delphi, which was a shrine to Apollo. Our narrator's name makes us wonder exactly what it is that the gods give to humanity, and especially to the Greeks, or 'Greekness'. Thus is introduced what will prove to be the major political theme of the dialogue: the role of the gods and religion in politics.

Apollodorus, however, turns out to be more of a shrine to Socrates than to Apollo. He is dedicated to Socrates with a kind of disquieting fanaticism:

> Don't you know that... it is scarcely three years now that I have been spending my time with Socrates and have made it my concern on each and every day to know whatever he says and does? Before that, I used to run round and round aimlessly, and though I believed I was doing something of importance, I was more miserable than anyone in the world (no less than you are at this moment), for I believed that everything was preferable to philosophy. (172c-173a)

Socrates is all that matters, and next to him all others are of no consequence. This includes Apollodorus himself; and so the greater his admiration for Socrates grows, the greater his abnegation grows. The comrade perceives this about him:

> You are always of a piece, Apollodorus, for you are always slandering yourself and others, and it seems to me you simply believe that – starting with yourself – everyone is miserable except Socrates. (173d)

---

[44] Or so it would seem – he is otherwise unknown to history.

The effect of this is evident virtually every time he speaks. For example, after Apollodorus has finished repeating his recollection of Pausanius' eulogy to Eros, he provides a little commentary of his own: "With Pausanius' pausation [Pausaníou dè pausaménou] – the wise teach me to talk in such balanced phrases..." (185c). It is not immediately clear here whether he affects wisdom and speaks in balanced phrases because he is being sardonic, or because he thinks that this is somehow attractive or impressive, but judging from all the evidence we have regarding his character, the latter seems more likely. If so, there is an irony involved, inasmuch as the man that he is so attracted to, Socrates, tries rather *not* to affect wisdom, and as Socrates tells it here, the phrasing and arrangement of his sentences are admittedly "as they chance to come" (199b). Although Apollodorus has been with Socrates for about three years, making it his concern "on each and every day to know whatever he says and does" (172c), he has either not sufficiently noticed or is incapable of imitating Socrates' habits of speech and action. He is attracted to Socrates because he somehow perceives that he is a wise man, or that he meets a standard of excellence that he has not seen in any other human being. He is, however, himself hopelessly inadequate in terms of this standard, and so he tries to compensate for his deficiency with silly shows of wisdom. He acts this way out of a kind of love for Socrates, but as this behaviour is decidedly unSocratic, the more that he does this, the more he widens the gulf between himself and Socrates. Sensing this, he loses self-respect (173c-e). The more he loves Socrates, the more he hates himself.

The character of Apollodorus personifies the unhealthy tendency in the religious towards strident and impolitic behaviour – an ever-present political problem. He certainly cannot speak like the typically polite Platonic Socrates; indeed he seems to have very limited or poor dialogic ability. His speech is something more akin to a recording: what we see him do is *record* things, and expound the teaching that he so enjoys hearing in the most literal terms. For example, he has heard that the unexamined life is not worth living, but he cannot use this to any real benefit – as an invitation to live and examine. All he can do is use it to deprecate the activity of everyone but his god Socrates. He cants rather than converses. But because people are generally interested in the Great Man, they listen. His cant thus becomes a key practical source of information about the Great Man and his teaching.[45] The accuracy of his account is indeed said to have been verified by the Great Man, but what is disseminated is devotion devoid of genuine understanding. The account of the symposium that we get from him is thus given in an indiscriminate manner. Apollodorus told the story the other day to one he considered non-philosophic and miserable (173a), and now he is telling it again to someone he respects even less, whose kind of talk – "of the rich and of money-makers" (173c) – he says he despises. This is not a story told in confidence, between lovers say, or between friends who have reason to trust each other. Our account of the symposium is given without care or discretion.

It originates with another strange devotee of Socrates, one named Aristodemus (or 'best of the people'), an odd little man who – in the zeal of his dedication to Socrates – tries to emulate him as best he can (173b). But he is no better suited to this task than is Apollodorus, and so he ends up emulating mainly only the surface appearance of Socrates: he acquires an aspect of poverty and asceticism, walking around – somewhat comically – as Socrates usually does, barefoot and unbathed. We are reminded here that this is indeed merely the surface – the outward show – of Socrates, and not at all essential to his character, by the fact that in this dialogue he appears freshly bathed and wearing fancy slippers (174a). In his subsequent encomium, Socrates denies that Eros[46] is a god, claiming instead that he is an *intermediary* between the gods and humans. His account of eros turns out to be an apt description of the *usual* Platonic Socrates (202e-203e). But on this particular night, as Socrates has beautified his outward show, the description that he gives of Eros appears to match not Socrates but rather Aristodemus. As Eros is posited in Socrates' account as an intermediary between humans and the gods, and as Aristodemus – who is the original source for all accounts of the symposium (173b) – appears as the intermediary between we human readers and the speakers of the symposium, those speakers acquire a kind of divine and holy aspect. The seven speakers thus appear to us as gods, a new pantheon.

---

[45] See Bloom "The Ladder of Love" in *Love and Friendship* 448.

[46] The eulogizers are ostensibly praising a deity, the god Eros. I convey this sense with an upper case 'E', lower case otherwise. The fact that they are praising the god Eros does not imply that they believe that eros really is a god. It does, however, remind us of an aspect of the Athenian democracy that is different from the democracies of the modern West: it is not a liberal regime. It has an official religion, and there are stiff penalties for transgressing it, as the trial and death of Socrates remind us. Public or semi-public (as is this symposium) rational discourse about natural things (such as eros) in illiberal regimes must apparently comport with the established religion. A convenient way of accomplishing this is to express natural concepts in mythical terms. Thus, for example, in *Protagoras*, when the eponym is manipulated by Socrates into giving what amounts to an account of man's political nature (and thus, implicitly, of what he can offer to politically ambitious men), he resorts to mythical language (319a-323a). The constraints imposed by illiberal regimes, at least those such as the Athenian, are really not that constrictive. And they arguably elevate rational discourse: one can wonder whether an assembly of modern intellectuals, devoid of mythical sensibility (since they have no need of it), could ever produce such beautiful speeches in praise of eros as we find in *Symposium*. In any event, the fact that the encomiasts are enjoined to praise a god Eros

Socrates is beautified because he is going to the house of a beauty, Agathon (174a). Agathon is throwing a party for himself, to celebrate his victory in the city's tragedy contest the night before. The big celebration was the night before. This symposium has the feeling of 'the night after'. There was apparently a lot of hard drinking the night before, and many of men present this evening are hung-over. As Agathon notes, he does not want to drink heavily, nor does he "have the strength" (176b). So it is that the men present at this dinner party are somewhat slack and subdued.[47] Noticing this, the doctor of the group, Eryximachus, advises against further drink:

> Now, since in my opinion none of those present is eager to drink a lot of wine, perhaps I should be less disagreeable were I to speak the truth about what drunkenness is. For I believe this has become quite plain to me from the art of medicine. Drunkenness is a hard thing for human beings; and as far as it is in my

---

that in all likelihood none of them actually believes is a god causes us to think about the role of the gods as regards both politics and our erotic natures.

[47] Thus, this evening is not intended to be a bacchanalia, but rather a quiet party. This need not imply that a quiet party is more erotic than a bacchanalia. It could be that the bacchanalia is indeed more erotic, but that one cannot convey an adequate sense of it with words, which is as much as to say that one cannot give a fully satisfying logical account of it. To put this another way, the point of conveying the teaching on erotic love with this symposium could be that only a muted and diminished eroticism is comprehensible. At the end of the evening, it becomes a bacchanalia: a group of revellers burst in and, "everything was full of commotion, and everybody was compelled – but no longer with any order – to drink a great deal of wine" (223b), the narrative about the dinner party ceases at once. Apparently there is nothing more to say about it at that point.

> power, I should neither be willing to go on drinking nor to advise another to so, particularly if he still has a headache from yesterday's debauch. (176c-d)

He speaks to something that afflicts them, and – precisely because it currently afflicts them – he is able to command their attention. Speaking at this point in time yesterday he would not likely have been so successful, as he would then have been 'more disagreeable'. His power extends further tonight precisely because it is based importantly on their awareness of some suffering in themselves that he has the expert knowledge to remedy. Phaedrus eagerly concurs with his advice, saying, "I am used to obeying you, particularly in whatever you say about medicine; and now the rest will do so too, if they take good counsel" (176e). Everyone agrees to this, and with their obedience thus obtained, his rule is established.

Now the rule of the doctor is perhaps the most unproblematic rule one can imagine: we willingly accede to his rule because he rules us for own apparent good. Moreover, the sensibleness of this arrangement seems ratified in that he apparently rules us as he rules himself. This is because he rules by an art, and – in general (*Republic* 342a-e) – the arts rule and are masters of that which they are arts, and every art rightly practiced rules for the advantage of that which it masters. The medical art is master of and rules for the advantage of bodies, the doctor's as well as the patient's. The medical art is often treated as the archetypical art, perhaps because the advantage of bodies, health, is plausibly regarded by most people as the highest and most comprehensive human good that any of the arts can produce. But the domain of the medical art, like that of all the arts, is decisively limited by its subject matter, by that over which it is master. It masters a subject that is only of partial interest to humans, even if one of the subjects that humans take most seriously: their bodily health. It is specialized, and hence not itself an adequate basis for complete rule over humans. Thus, when Eryximachus rules against drink, he is obeyed on his own authority, but when he goes beyond his domain, proposing a plan of action for the evening not limited to the good of the body, he is obeyed with the support of Socrates, who understands souls. The best rule comprises technical knowledge superintended by something else, something that Socrates has to offer, his expert knowledge of nothing but erotics (176a-177e).

The plan that Eryximachus proposes is as follows: a) there is to be no forced drinking, but each is to drink freely as much as he desires; b) the men are to dismiss the flute girl; and c) instead entertain themselves by each giving a speech in praise of Eros, starting on the left, and then working around to the right in the order that they sit (176e-177d). As this proposal provides the overarching structure of the evening, it is in some sense authoritative. It is, in effect, the law of *Symposium*. It is vitally important to see the implications of this law. It commands the men to dwell on that part of the truth of eros that is congenial to them. This is an exercise that is done gladly and willingly. The speeches are light-hearted. The speakers are enjoined to *praise* Eros. That is, they are *not* enjoined to speak the whole truth about eros. The whole truth may not be pleasant, it may even be depressing, or sickening, or otherwise unpleasant. If there is some part of eros that is not praiseworthy or amenable to praise, then the presentation of eros given in *Symposium* must be partial and incomplete. It is prohibited by the law of *Symposium* and by good manners from being the whole truth. We have no reason to expect that the erotic speeches of *Symposium* contain the whole truth about eros, at least not directly.

4 Phaedrus

> *Nobly born man! Would that he had written that one must do it for the poor man rather than a rich, and for the older rather than the younger, and whatever other things pertain to me and to most of us. Then his speeches would indeed be urbane and beneficial to the people.*
>
> (Phaedrus *227c-d)*

Our narrator tells us that the first eulogy to Eros began "at somewhat the following point (178a)." This explicit lack of precision concerning the beginning of the first eulogy to Eros, on an evening during which the plan is to offer eulogies to Eros, serves to draw our attention to the general problem of the beginning or origin – the ambiguity concerning the beginning of the evening's entertainment symbolizing the difficulty of explaining origins generally. Eros is so old, according to Phaedrus, that he has no parents: "the parents of Eros neither exist nor are they spoken of by anyone, whether prose author or poet; but Hesiod says that Chaos came into being (*genesthai*) first,

'Then thereafter
Broad-breasted Earth, always the safe seat of all,
and Eros'".[48] (178b)

The implication is that earth (i.e., the humanly meaningful world which man inhabits) and eros simply sprang into being. If Chaos really is the first thing, then there is no cause of things at the origin, and hence ultimately no eternal Cosmos. In that case, philosophical reflection upon the nature and causes of man, which inevitably leads to the philosophical quest for the first things or principles, is futile. Phaedrus is aphilosophy, inasmuch as he enunciates a position on the origin that is inconsistent with the existence of philosophy as it is classically understood.[49]

---

[48] Hesiod, *Theogony* lines 116, 117 and 120.

[49] I believe that Leo Strauss was thinking of this section of *Symposium* when he wrote the following:

> The philosophic quest for the first things presupposes not merely that there are first things but that the first things are always and that things which are always or are imperishable are more truly beings than the things which are not always. These presuppositions follow from the fundamental premise that no being emerges without a cause or that it is impossible that "at first Chaos came to be," i.e., that the first things jumped into being out of nothing and through nothing. In other words, the manifest changes would be impossible if there did not exist something permanent or eternal,

If Eros is indeed so old that he has no parents, then he was never born. This may at first seem paradoxical, since we naturally associate eros with birth, but the more we think about it, the more we see the sense of what Phaedrus is saying. If Eros did have parents – if eros was somehow generated after the fashion of animate beings – then it would come to be in a manifestly erotic fashion, in which case it would already exist before its birth. Eros as a principle of generation cannot itself be a generated thing. It is thus a perplexing problem as to how eros did or could have come into being. This problem might reasonably cause one to speculate that eros did not in fact come into being, but rather that it simply is always. Phaedrus, however, insists that Eros did indeed come into being. If he is right about that, then it *must* come into being in some *un*erotic fashion. The way that Phaedrus presents the problem of the origin of eros causes us to reflect on the difference between generation and genesis.[50] He continues: "And Parmenides says that genesis,

> 'First, of all gods, devised [or 'contrived', 'planned'; *mētisato*] Eros.'"[51] (178b)

> or the manifest contingent beings require the existence of something necessary and therefore eternal. (Stauss *Natural Right and History* 89)

[50] Or transliterated: *gignomai* and *genesis*, respectively. The Greek words have a wide range of meanings. *Gignomai* applied to animate beings generally means 'come into being', in the sense of being born, but it can also mean 'become' and 'happen'. *Genesis* primarily means 'origin', 'source' or 'beginning', but it also means a 'coming into being', 'creation' and 'manner of birth' (thus aquiring connotations of 'race' or 'tribe'). The words have meanings which can be close, and Phaedrus seems to use them interchangeably. For example, he speaks of Chaos, Earth and Eros as having come into being (*genesthai*, aorist infinitive of *gignomai*, 178b) even though *genesis* would have been the more appropriate word (since his assertion that Eros has no parents immediately precedes this) to use (as he does elsewhere). The fact that he uses 'generation' (*gignomai*) when 'genesis' would seem to be the right word draws our attention to the difference between generation and genesis; the fact that he is able to draws our attention to the similarity.

[51] Parmenides, frag. 13. Phaedrus implies that according to Parmenides genesis devised Eros, but it is not simply evident from what we have of Parmenides that this was his meaning. The immediately preceding fragment speaks of "the divinity who governs all things":

> For the narrower rings became filled with unmixed fire and those over them with night, in which moves a proportion of flame. Between these is the divinity [*daímōn*] who governs [or, 'steers', 'pilots'; *kubernâ*] all things. For everywhere she initiates [or, 'begins'; *árchei*] hateful birth and union, sending female to unite with male and male conversely with female.

Phaedrus uses a poet and a philosopher as authorities to support his assertion as to the great age of Eros, but it is important to see that the Parmenides quote points to a very different kind of origin than does the Hesiod quote. In Parmenides, Eros has a cause: it is *devised* by a divinity, what Phaedrus calls genesis. Eros, as the first of all gods, cannot be devised by a god.[52]

Whether Phaedrus realizes this or not, we are driven to make a distinction between gods and divinities. Genesis is not a god, but rather is antecedent to the gods (note in this connection that – unlike Chaos, Earth, and Eros – genesis is not capitalized in the Greek). Now 'to devise' necessarily implies forethought and intelligence; if Eros is devised by genesis, then the Cosmos which antecedes Eros and the gods is endowed with forethought and intelligence. The implication is that our Cosmos is endowed with a forethought and intelligence that somehow rules it, and it is hence reasonable to assume that rational man can profitably reflect upon this rule.

Of course, this is not *his* point. The reason Phaedrus insists on the great old age of eros is that elders are supposed to be honoured, and he is eulogizing eros. In a sense,

---

The divinity exercises power by causing "hateful birth and union", i.e., generation. Frag. 13 then likely refers to this divinity as devising the god Eros. In causing Eros and generation to come into being, she is thereby 'genesis', and so Phaedrus' interpretation of Parmenides on this point must be in a sense correct.

However, the divinity clearly has a larger meaning. Earlier in the poem, she refers to all becoming as not being, i.e., as unreal: "And how could what becomes have being, how come into being, seeing that, if it came to be, it is not, nor is it, if at some time it is going to be" (frag. 8, 19-20). Her whole discussion of being and becoming and the distinction between them reminds one of the discussion of this distinction in Plato's *Republic*, but with this crucial difference: whereas she denies becoming is real in any sense, the ontology in *Republic* accords it some (albeit lesser) kind of reality. The Socratic turn to the examination of erotic man and his opinions is philosophically justified only if he has some kind of reality, and if he thus points to a deeper reality. Of all the pre-Socratic philosophers, Plato especially honours Parmenides, most obviously in that of them all he distinguishes only Parmenides by naming a dialogue after him. Plato clearly considers his view to be important and credible, even if ultimately inadequate. In my opinion, the reference to Parmenides here is meant to draw the reader into a consideration of his limitations, in particular as regards an adequate understanding of erotic man.

[52] Much as eros, as a principle of generation, cannot itself be a generated thing. For Parmenides (and, it seems, for Phaedrus), the gods – who, according to the traditional accounts, are themselves notoriously erotic – come into being along with eros. We are meant to wonder about the connection between eros and the gods.

he is simply exhibiting his 'conventionalism'. But the implications of his conventionalism are far-reaching. He says that Eros is among the oldest of the gods and that "to be ranked among the oldest is a mark of honour" (178a). People generally honour whoever or whatever they perceive to do them some good. In the modern West, we honour movie stars and professional athletes because we get pleasure from watching them, and modern man tends to equate the good with pleasure. In saying that the oldest is a mark of honour, Phaedrus implies that the old is a cause of good. He makes it clear that this is indeed his position:

> So there is an agreement in many sources that Eros is among the oldest.[53] And *as he is the oldest*, we have him as the cause of the greatest goods. (my italics, 178c)

The oldest is the cause of the greatest goods (cf. Aristotle *Metaphysics*, 178b ff). Phaedrus implicitly equates the good with the ancestral.

It might seem strange that he honours the old, given that he apparently thinks of himself as the young beloved, and that consequently he would be, by his argument, directed towards the older and more honourable lover. To rephrase, his argument has the effect of honouring others above himself.[54] Although he no doubt thinks that being a beautiful and loved beloved is itself a kind of honour, he is unambiguous that a (older) lover is indeed "a more divine thing than a beloved" (180b). We can discern a pattern of evidence to suggest that Phaedrus honours the old. All of the authorities for his arguments are old and well-established poets – traditional authorities. One could characterize his basic argument about the beneficence of love as traditional. And his treatment of the gods reveals a proclivity to favour age and tradition.[55]

---

[53] The transliteration is *presbutatos*, the superlative form of *presbus*, which is an honorific term for old man.

[54] Alcibiades' speech is the only other eulogy that has this character.

[55] Phaedrus is silent about the Olympians, generally referring to gods generically (i.e., the god or gods), and only ever explicitly naming gods which are pre-Olympic. In the above quote from Hesiod, Phaedrus actually deletes text that refers to Olympians. The full text runs as follows:

> Then thereafter
> Broad-breasted Earth, always the safe seat of all immortals,
> Who hold the tops of snowy Olympus,
> And gloomy Tartarus in the recesses of the broad-wayed Earth,
> And Eros, who is the most beautiful among the immortal gods, the dissolver of care,
> Who overpowers the mind and thoughtful council in the breast of all gods and

The reasons for the equation of the good with the ancestral, or for the general disposition to honour what has gone before, are clear enough. Older people are likely to have more and varied experience, and on that basis are more likely to be prudent, and hence appropriately honoured for the good which prudence produces. Moreover, parents are typically the cause of their children's good, and are, as a kind of gratitude, honoured by them on that basis. And in every *successful* polity, the current generation honours prior generations and especially the founders as being in some sense the cause of the present success.[56]

> human beings. (Hesiod *Theogony* 116-121)

A comparison of the full text and Phaedrus' edited version of it shows that his deletion has two important effects: a) it suppresses the Olympians and therewith Eros' connection to them, and b) it suppresses the allusion to the problematic effect which eros has on our rational souls. I will explore the significance of the second point below. The first suggests an aversion to the new generation of gods, which are, supposedly because younger, less honourable.

[56] Nietzsche sees the disposition to honour the old as a sign of political health:

> .... If one imagines this rude kind of logic carried to its end, [roughly, the logic of honouring ancestors] then the ancestors of the *most powerful* tribes are bound eventually to grow to monstrous dimensions through the imagination of growing fear and to recede into the darkness of the divinely uncanny and unimaginable: in the end the ancestor must necessarily be transfigured into a god. (*Genealogy of Morals*, 2nd essay, aph. 19)

The basic inclination that Phaedrus has to honour age and tradition make him 'pro-order' or 'pro-law', because it pre-disposes him to what is already established. In modern political language, we would call him a 'conservative', as opposed to a 'liberal' or 'progressive'. Again quoting from Nietzsche:

> The profound reverence for age and tradition – all law rests upon this double reverence – the faith and prejudice in favour of ancestors and disfavour of those yet to come are typical of the morality of the powerful; and when the men of 'modern ideas', conversely, believe almost instinctively in 'progress' and 'the future' and more and more lack respect for age, this in itself would sufficiently betray the ignoble origin of the 'ideas'. (*Beyond Good and Evil*, aph. 260)

This, incidentally, argues for Phaedrus as noble, powerful and a master in Nietzsche's language, which doesn't seem quite right given what we know of Phaedrus from *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*. But in the same aphorism Nietzsche indicates that both the master and slave morality can exist within the confines of a single soul. As I will argue below, Phaedrus' eulogy to Eros is driven in part by utilitarian considerations, and according to Nietzsche (again from the same aphorism): "Slave morality is essentially a morality of utility."

But before the polity can be successful, it must first come into existence, and it will not come into existence if what it is essential to its existence – its laws – are open to criticism. Before the laws can be criticized, they must first come into existence, and they will not come into existence unless they are initially deemed to be beyond question. They can only be deemed to be beyond question if we regard them as manifestly good, and this, in turn, can only happen if we regard those who made the laws, i.e., our ancestors, as being of the sort who could plausibly be said to make manifestly good laws; we must see our ancestors as being in some decisive respect better than we are.[57] Phaedrus is the representative within *Symposium* of a basic kind of psychic orientation which would seem to be necessary for politics to emerge, and which continues to exist in latter days as one which supports the continued existence of politics. Phaedrus, who originates the speeches of *Symposium*, is the first speaker to raise the question of the origin of Eros. In equating the good with the ancestral, he is also the first speaker to raise the question of the origin of politics. We can conjecture the following connection between these two questions: specifically *human* eros (as opposed to eros simply), about which Phaedrus is indeed primarily concerned, originates with politics.

The originating speaker of the dialogue plays the role of the original political man. And, as his explication of the good to which eros is instrumental makes clear, he evaluates eros in 'political' terms. The greatest good (*megistōn agathōn*) that Phaedrus sees as accruing from oldest Eros is that a youth gets a valuable (or, 'useful', 'good of its kind', 'serviceable'; *chrëstós*) lover, and that a lover gets a valuable beloved (178c). His choice of words here speaks volumes. He does not say that the greatest good accruing from eros is to get a good (*agathos*) or noble and beautiful (*kalos*[58]) lover, but rather a valuable one. The lover is *good for something*, and – practically speaking – this is why Eros is worthy of praise. The greatest good then accruing from eros is not simply a lover or beloved, but rather what comes of this, what comes of 'being in love'.[59] The instrumental quality of love in his account makes one wonder if he has ever experienced the real thing. The good that comes from 'being in love' is that it *implants* "that which should guide human beings who are going to live nobly [*kalös*] throughout their lives" more beautifully (*kalos*) than does blood ties, honours, and wealth (178c). The thing that love implants is "shame in the face of shameful things and love of honour in the face of beautiful things; for without them neither city nor private person can accomplish great and beautiful deeds [*megála kaì kalá érga*]" (178d). The greatest good then is finally great and beautiful deeds. We see evidence in this speech of Phaedrus – evidence that is corroborated by further evidence from the dialogue named after him – that he is profoundly impressed by the *kalon*.[60] But whatever sense of *kalos* he has is actually extrinsic to the phenomenon of love as he understands and describes it. Love is not itself *kalos*, and as he explains it here, it is itself at a remove from the *kalon* life; love itself only best *implants* that which makes us live *kalos* lives. In any event, the 'greatest good' for Phaedrus, or the highest thing, is clearly the *kalon*.[61]

---

[57] Or, in the words of Leo Strauss:

> Just as "old and one's own" originally was identical with right or good, so "new and strange" originally stood for bad. The notion connecting "old" and "one's own" is "ancestral." Prephilosophic life is characterized by the primeval identification of the good with the ancestral… For one cannot reasonably identify the good with the ancestral if one does not assume that the ancestors were absolutely superior to "us," and this means that they were superior to all ordinary mortals; one is driven to believe that the ancestors, or those who established the ancestral way, were gods or sons of gods or at least "dwelling near the gods." The identification of the good with the ancestral leads to the view that the right way was established by gods or sons of gods or pupils of gods: the right way must be a divine law… Originally, the questions concerning the first things and the right way are answered before they are raised. They are answered by authority. For authority as the right of human beings to be obeyed is essentially derivative from law, and law is originally nothing other than they way of life of the community… (*Natural Right and History* 83-84)

---

[58] A single Greek word, *kalos*, translates both the English 'noble' and 'beautiful', and this fact must always be kept in mind by the reader. There are times when 'noble' seems to capture the meaning of *kalos* well enough, and likewise with 'beautiful'. But there are also times when both meanings seem to be present and should be conveyed. In these cases, I will, accordingly, simply supply the transliteration instead of English.

[59] The instrumental goods typically are painful (these goods – not good in themselves, but rather good for their effects – constitute Glaucon's third class of good, such as "gymnastic exercise, medical treatment when sick as well as the practice of medicine, and the other money-makers", *Republic* 357c), and Phaedrus seems to think of 'being in love' as somewhat painful.

[60] Hence, Phaedrus cannot really be understood, as Rosen implies, as a kind of prototype of the Hobbesian Man. See *Plato's Symposium* 55-56.

[61] This is by no means a common sentiment, and it causes us to wonder about the relationship between the good and the *kalos*. The speech of Phaedrus thus raises another of *Symposium's* central themes and a difficult philosophical problem: whether the good

Substantively, the greatest good, or the *kalon*, amounts to the accomplishment of great and beautiful deeds. What Phaedrus evidently means by this is *heroic* deeds, the sort of deeds about which the poets write the poems of which he is so very enamoured, and the sort of deeds that tend to be mainly associated with the affairs of the city, especially affairs of war. For Phaedrus the greatest good, the *kalon*, resides in the political. It is important to note in this connection that in speaking of these deeds he mentions *first* the city, *then* the private individual (178d). Moreover, the word he uses for private individual – *idiötën*, from which we get the English 'idiot' – conveys a sense of the individual understood in contrast to, and as something less than, the city. The city is for Phaedrus something higher than the man, and he accordingly understands the good in primarily political terms. If Phaedrus is indeed the dialogue's representative of the original political man, then his character seems to suggest the following about the origin of politics: the city originates because man is *attracted* to the idea of it, because the city seems larger than man and indeed somehow larger than life; because it is *kalos*.[62]

We typically think of eros as being an essentially private phenomenon, but because Phaedrus sees eros as instrumental to the political good, he evaluates it in political terms. It thus inevitably takes on a decidedly public aspect. In his hands, eros becomes something that is not so much individually experienced as it is observed by others (and accordingly, words like 'come to light', 'show', and 'see' occur frequently in his eulogy to eros):

> So I assert that in the case of any man[63] who loves, were it to come to light that he was either doing something shameful or putting up with it from another out of

---

or the *kalos* is supreme. Compelling arguments can be made for both. In Plato's *Republic*, the highest thing is the good, but at the end of this dialogue's eulogies to eros, Socrates' Diotima provides an account of the power of the *kalos* that seems to suggest that it is the highest thing.

[62] This of course stands in marked contrast to the more common and perhaps more sensible explanation for the origin of politics: the city originates to serve essentially utilitarian purposes (cf. *Republic* 369b-372b, Aristotle *Politics* 1252a24-1252b29). The difference is a consequence of the erotic theme of *Symposium*.

[63] The transliteration is *ándra*; which means man in the strong sense, a masculine or 'real' man, as opposed to a merely male human being, *ánthropos* (which can also mean human being generally, much as English 'man' or 'mankind' can refer to all human beings). The distinction between *ándra* and *ánthropos* is often overlooked by translators and interpreters of the dialogues, but it is important. A sense of what is at stake in this

> cowardice and not defending himself, he would not be as pained on being observed by either his father, his comrades, or anyone else as by his beloved. We observe that this same thing holds in the case of the beloved; he is exceptionally ashamed before his lovers whenever he is seen to be involved in something shameful. (178d-e)

One wonders what would happen if Phaedrus' manly lover were not observed by anyone. Would he then feel free to act in a shameful way? The fact that all Phaedrus seems to know about love is what comes to him through its outward shows is further evidence that he has no familiarity with its 'inner' experience: he is no *lover* himself, merely a recipient of the benefits of being loved. His eulogy to Eros is an outward appearance that corresponds to no inner experience or reality. But the inner reality of eros is obviously what most needs to be understood, what is most real, and what accounts for whatever reality its outward show or appearance has. Realizing this forces the reader to reflect upon the inner reality that has eluded Phaedrus. His speech thus raises for us the fundamental problem of appearance versus reality, which problem is in a sense the origin of philosophy. Phaedrus, a thoroughly political man, is entirely engrossed by appearances. The milieu of the political is the apparent. The task of specifically political philosophy, which Socrates is traditionally credited with having founded, is to account for the reality that explains the realm of appearance within which politics operates. Perhaps the most basic problem in this connection, which the speech of Phaedrus sets up nicely for us, and which will continue to be developed throughout the dialogue, is to understand how the reality of human eros, i.e., our erotic natures, explains the more apparent or political aspects of our natures. At the end of this evening of eulogies to eros, Socrates' Diotima will give an account of the psychology, the inner reality, behind the very appearances that so impress Phaedrus.

Phaedrus' account to this point is that eros leads to a sense of shame and honour, which in turn leads to great and beautiful deeds, the *kalos* deeds of politics that constitute the greatest good. The sense of honour and shame plays a literally pivotal role in his account between the eros that he is ostensibly eulogizing and what he holds to be

---

distinction can be conveyed to an English reader by considering the popular Greek saying, *polloì mèn ánthropoi, olígoi dè ándres* – 'many are human, few are men'. The issue of what constitutes a man will obviously be of great importance in a dialogue the substance of which is dedicated to eulogies to eros. For this reason, henceforth wherever man in the strong sense is used, I will provide the transliteration in square brackets to alert the reader to this fact.

the greatest good, the good that ultimately justifies eros as praiseworthy. The pivotal role of shame and honour in Phaedrus' political understanding of eros leads the reader to reflect on the one hand upon their relation to eros, and on the other upon their function in politics. A properly orientated sense of honour and shame are of central importance to healthy politics. The ability of politicians (*politikoi*) to resolve issues, to 'make a deal', is essential for the functioning of any kind of politics. But this is only possible if they have some confidence that promises made will actually be kept, and this, in turn, requires some sense of honour amongst them, as not every agreement can be backed up with a threat of force. Moreover, political subjects (*politai*) are not mainly ruled through the threat of punishment. Rather, it is mainly a sense of shame that underpins the shared understanding of what is and is not permissible conduct that makes political life possible.[64] And it is mainly a sense of honour that positively channels people's energies in what the regime deems politically salutary ways (cf. *Republic* 551a). Rule through a sense of honour and shame is the distinctively human form of rule, and generally speaking those who cannot be so ruled can only be ruled through force, like an animal.

Viewed from the political perspective, then, which is in the end the perspective of Phaedrus, eros would seem to be a 'good thing' to the extent that it does in fact implant a sense of honour and shame better than any other thing. It is not clear that it does. Here we must remember that the speakers of the evening have been enjoined to praise eros, not to tell the truth about it. Eros *may* implant a sense of honour and shame, but as we know from common experience, it can also be a powerful impetus towards shamelessness.[65] The most base deeds can in fact be driven by eros, as we will soon be reminded by the eulogy of Pausanius. Eros as a psychic force is ambiguous, and it is not clear that Phaedrus understands this. Yet, to give him his due, his account of the psychic mechanism whereby eros *can* inspire to great and beautiful deeds does seem partially accurate. Certainly, it is often true that love intensifies the painful feeling of shame and the pleasure of honour. He gives four examples of shameful acts where this is in fact the case: not defending oneself, deserting one's post, throwing away one's weapons, and not coming to the aid of one's beloved when he is in danger (178d-a). The thing that these shameful acts have in common is that they are all acts of cowardice. And this is the very thing that he seems to have hit upon: that there is something about *cowardice in particular* which makes its observance by one's lover or beloved particularly painful (and obversely, it is particularly pleasurable to be so observed in an act of courage). But there are other kinds of things one may feel shame about, other vices besides cowardice, such as injustice and licentiousness, to name two. It is not obvious that one would feel *especially* ashamed if either of these were observed by a lover or beloved. There are others we might feel greater shame before. In the above quote, Phaedrus mentions two others before whom we might feel *especially* ashamed if they were to observe our shameful acts: comrades and fathers. Might not one feel the pain of shame at doing injustice (an act of theft, say) to a greater extent if it were observed by one's comrade? Would one not feel the pain of shame at licentiousness (extreme drunkenness, say) to a greater extent if it were observed by one's father? In short, it does not seem that he has actually got the phenomena quite right. One suspects it is much more varied than he represents it. Perhaps even an entire taxonomy of shame could be constructed on just this very basis: before whom one feels the greatest pain of shame.

---

[64] The eponym of Plato's *Protagoras* provides a thought-provoking and insightful treatment of this issue. According to a myth he gives there regarding the origin of humanity, man originally received the arts and rational speech but not Shame and Right. Though we were able to provide sustenance for ourselves through art, art alone was insufficient protection against the wild beasts. Our only hope for survival was common defense, which was rendered impossible by the fact that we could not get along with each other without Shame and Right. Zeus, fearing for our survival, had Hermes bring us Shame and Right, which made possible the orderly living together of human beings in the city (*polis*), and an art of politics (*politikë*) which contains the art of war (*polimikë*). Of course, there is an irony here in that people come together for common defense not against other animals, but rather against other humans. This does not, however, effect the validity of the implied teaching about politics. Shame and Right were distributed to everyone – to 'laymen' (what Phaedrus described above as *idiötën*), as well as those skilled in the art of politics. One who understood the political art would understand this, and would understand exactly how cities are ordered by Shame and Right. The implied teaching is that those skilled in the political art rule through a sense of shame (*Protagoras* 320c-322d; cf. *Republic* 551a). As regards the role of a sense of shame and honour in political rule with respect to erotic matters in particular, see *Republic* 573 a-b.

---

[65] There is a famous Homeric story that makes this point beautifully. Hephaestus catches Ares and Aphrodite in the act of making love, and in anger the artisan god casts a golden net over them which preserves them in their coupling. This is an obviously shameful situation to be caught in, and all the gods gather around and laugh at them. But Hermes, deeply appreciating the beauty of the goddess, says that he would gladly trade places with Ares and endure all the jeering laughter of the gods if only he could lay with her (*Odyssey* VIII, 296-342). Hermes' eros for Aphrodite endows him with a kind of shamelessness, which kind is certainly inimical to healthy politics.

It goes without saying that the sense of honour and shame that plays the pivotal role in his account is *political* honour and shame. Phaedrus gives no indication that he understands, and certainly he offers no account of, a strictly *internal* or private sense of honour and shame. But it *is* possible to be ashamed of acting shamefully even if the shameful deeds are not observed by anyone, and even if they never subsequently 'come to light' in the public realm. Just as his understanding of eros has an essentially public or political quality, so too does his understanding of honour and shame. That Phaedrus should focus on the shame of cowardice is entirely in keeping with his political character. The virtue to which this vice corresponds is courage, and courage is the most overtly political virtue. This is in part because courageous deeds are often very visible,[66] and even spectacular, and are to that extent easily recognized and hence most likely to be honoured by the city as instances of virtue. Physical courage in particular, the kind which really shines in warfare, is the most readily apparent of all the forms which courage may take, and for this reason it attracts the city's greatest honours.[67] Political honour and shame are most closely allied with the virtue of political courage. Phaedrus' account is convincing, to the extent that it is, precisely because it is literally superficial, because it explains the surface or visible connection between these three things: eros, honour and shame, and courage.

The great and beautiful deeds to which eros ultimately leads in Phaedrus' account, via a sense of honour and shame, are courageous deeds. Eros is for Phaedrus politically beneficial *because* it leads to the virtue that he sees as unambiguously good for *kalos* politics. He thus proposes that cities and armies be organized along erotic lines, in effect a *politikë* and *polimikë* based ultimately upon *tà erotika*:

---

[66] Note in this connection, that the first words of Plato's *Laches*, traditionally subtitled 'On Courage', are: "You have beheld the man fighting in armour" (*Laches* 178a). It is impossible to translate into English, but the first word is actually 'beheld'. There is something about the nature of courage in particular, of all the virtues, which seems to make it especially amenable to being 'beheld'. We perhaps have a pre-intellectual ability to recognize courage. There are certain acts that are manifestly courageous, such that we know them to be instantiations of the virtue of courage even though we may have a hard time trying to give an adequate account of exactly why they are. This is the problem that Laches, a manifestly courageous man, runs into in dialogue with Socrates.

[67] See Craig, 66.

> So if there were any possibility that a city or an army could be composed of lovers and beloveds, then there could be no better way for them to manage their own city; for they would abstain from all that is shameful and be filled with love of honour before one another. And besides, were they to do battle along side one another, then even a few of this sort would win over just about all human beings; for a man [*anër*] in love would of course far less prefer to be seen by his beloved than by all the rest when it comes to deserting his post or throwing away his weapons; he would choose to be dead many times over before that happened. (178e-a)

The politically salutary effect of eros in the City of Phaedrus calls to mind the manner in which eros is handled in *Republic's* City in Speech. Lovers and beloveds are found among the ranks of both cities' armies, and both try to harness the natural power of eros for the good of the city. The City in Speech seems to go further, however, in this effort: it even promises erotic rewards for valour on the battlefield (*Republic* 468b-c). But it is only in a position to make this promise *after* eros has been tamed or thoroughly politicised. As I discussed above, the politicisation of eros brought about by the City in Speech controls our erotic natures in bizarre and apparently inhuman ways.[68] As a political proposition, the erotic schemes worked out in the City in Speech are completely unworkable and preposterous. This is as much as to say that a thoroughly politicised eros is impossible. Phaedrus has, as I have laboured to show, a politicised understanding of eros. The City in Speech and the City of Phaedrus both rely for their success on an impossible transformation or politicisation of eros.

To do justice to his position, it should be noted that, according to our historical sources, there later actually was an army organized more or less according to his proposal: the famous Sacred Band of Thebes, established by Gorgidas in Thebes following its liberation from Sparta in 379/8.[69] The effectiveness of the Theban Band as a fighting force is legendary and for a time it underpinned a Theban hegemony in Greece, which would seem to lend credibility to Phaedrus' argument. But a consideration of the Theban Band, or any fighting force like it, actually underscores its inadequacy. Every martial force has a heightened sense of honour and shame (i.e., above that found in the general population), especially as regards one's comrades, and soldiers are generally more courageous than the general populace. In these respects, the Theban Band was akin to other martial forces. What set it apart, however, was that its members had something more or other than courage and a heightened sense of honour and shame. The warrior of the Theban Band would hazard everything for the good of his beloved, regardless of whether this was observed by anyone or not, and indeed *regardless even of whether this was shameful or not.* As a practical matter, to hazard all for the good of one's beloved comrade will generally *turn out to be* honourable, which is what Phaedrus sees, but this is not primarily why the hazard is made. The warriors of the Theban Band *per hypothesis* act primarily out of a love for others, and not out of a love of honour. He does not understand love for others, and the connection that he posits between eros and a sense of honour and shame, and ultimately courage, is not necessary, and is largely incidental.

---

[68] I.e., in the ridiculous comedy of Book V of *Republic*. See pp. 9-10 above. The City in Speech as it is developed in Books II-IV largely ignores the problem of eros; the treatment of politics is thus less radical, and hence more practical than in Book V. Phaedrus' understanding of politics and eros is more like that of Book V than of Books II-IV; he appears to take seriously what is actually laughable.

[69] Simon and Hornblower, 1343.

Phaedrus is altogether awed by martial virtue. This might seem ironic, given that one rather suspects him to be preoccupied with a fear of pain and death – hence his valetudinarianism (e.g., 176d-e) and his affair with the *Doctor* Eryximachus – and so lacking in courage.[70] In fact, one could hardly imagine a person further removed from the warrior-lover that he is eulogizing, and certainly a city actually populated by the likes of him and Eryximachus would bear no resemblance whatsoever to the city he presents. Phaedrus' experience of the great and beautiful deeds of martial valour is vicarious, coming entirely through poetry and traditional stories. But it is because he himself lacks direct experience of courage that it is difficult for him to evaluate courageous men and the sort of things they can do. This deficiency may cause him to admire them perhaps excessively.

Eros is for Phaedrus beneficial, and hence worthy of a eulogy, *because* it leads to the (martial) virtue which he sees as unambiguously good for *kalos* politics. Eros leads to virtue, it is not itself virtue. On his account, then, there can be virtue apart from eros. He now makes this implication explicit:

---

[70] Indeed, he comes across as something of a softy, and hardly as an exemplar of the martial virtue. In the dialogue named after him, one of the first things that we learn about him is that he prefers to take his exercise from walks along country roads rather than from exhausting laps around exercise tracks (*Phaedrus* 227a).

> And, to say nothing of leaving behind one's beloved or not coming to his aid when he is in danger, there is no one so bad that, once the god Eros had entered him, he would not be directed toward virtue [*aretēn*] – to the point where he is like the one who is best by nature. (*phúsei*; 179a-b)

To be directed towards virtue makes one better; the best man is the virtuous man. Eros directs one towards virtue to the point where he is *like* the best or virtuous man. Eros, it seems, produces only a facsimile of the best man, and is a kind of substitute for virtue. Phaedrus actually divines that there is something deeper behind the appearances that impress him so much. This thing is nature. The original political man is the first speaker to mention nature. He is driven to nature because, although he cannot understand it, nature is implicit in politics. All politics seek some good – that is, polities are organized to achieve some perceived good that antecedes political organization.[71] All politics honour the good that they seek, and hence the men who seem to provide it. But the question naturally arises, what is the true or highest good? and then, who provides it best? and then simply, who is best? The judgment inherent in such questions demands a standard of evaluation, and this standard cannot finally be found in politics themselves. Consequently, a quest for trans-political standards becomes necessary, and hence the appeal to nature. Both the impetus for, and the means of, the transcendence of politics is inherent in politics themselves.

Plato uses the speech of Phaedrus to illustrate why this is so. The greatest good for Phaedrus is the great and beautiful deeds of *kalos* politics. His account of why men would perform such deeds rests on a political conception of eros and the political psychology of honour and shame. But this is inadequate. The performance of such deeds requires of men that they possess the virtue of courage; the performance of such deeds requires of men that they give of themselves, often and even especially in ways that do not redound to their own personal advantage. The ability or the inclination to act in ways that do not simply comport with the calculus of personal advantage is perhaps essential to all virtue. Phaedrus thinks that virtue is called forth with honour and shame, and to a certain extent he is right. Courageous men generally seek honour, and it is just to honour them for their courage. But there must be more to it than that. It is impossible that they give of themselves simply for payment in honour, for courage requires the willingness and ability to endure all sorts of hardships, including even death. But why would anyone die for honour, when, being dead, they will not be able to enjoy it? Death is the limit of his analysis. When Phaedrus continues on with,

---

[71] For Aristotle, this was an apparently self-evident proposition. That he considered it as such is indicated by the first sentence of his *Politics*, where he observes: "everyone does everything for the sake of what they think good" (1252a2-3). That is to say, as a practical matter, we are all ruled by our own conception of the good. This is for Aristotle literally the very first thing to know about politics.

> And what is more, lovers are the only ones who are willing to die for the sake of another; and that is not only true of men [*ándres*] but of women as well. (179b)

he has actually left the realm of his analysis behind. There is nothing in any of what he has said that would explain the willingness to die, or more simply, death itself. But in order truly to understand and evaluate courage, one would have to understand these things. The political analysis of courage ultimately fails because of its inability to cope with the problem of death. One must have recourse to nature in order to do so.

But *how* is the appeal to nature made? It is implicit in political argument. We actually see this demonstrated in the argument of Phaedrus. He notes in the above quote that it is not only man lovers but also woman lovers that are willing to die for the sake of another. The mention of women seems oddly out of place here since courage is not generally expected of them,[72] and he is in any event primarily interested in erotic relations between men. But it does serve to remind us that erotic relations between men and women are strictly necessary for generation. The relevance of this is that birth is the counterpart of death. Birth, life, and death – this constitutes the continuing cycle through which animate nature perpetuates itself. This being the simply natural order, eros would seem to be the key to this order. Socrates' Diotima will later give an account of this order wherein the individuals that constitute it are instinctively aware of their participation in some larger whole. Death, and the willingness to die, makes sense in light of this order; it does not make sense in light of politics understood apart from this order. The true standard for the evaluation of the 'best' man is to be found in nature rather than politics. The best man for Phaedrus is the courageous man, because he executes the great and beautiful deeds of *kalos* politics. But a simply political analysis of the courageous man fails because he is not exclusively motivated by political considerations, and consequently he cannot be adequately comprehended in simply political terms. The courageous man in Phaedrus' account sacrifices for the good of others, or more generally, for the good of the whole. When we speak of specifically *political* courage, this whole is obviously the city. But the city is instrumental to human generation, and as such it is instrumental to nature. The example that Phaedrus gives of a woman willing to die for her beloved leads us to a consideration of the role of the city in human generation:

---

[72] The specifically masculine character of the virtue of courage is captured nicely in the Greek language by the very close etymological relationship between the word for man (*andros* in the genitive) and for courage (*andreia*, which also means manliness).

> Alcestis, the daughter of Pelias, offers a sufficient testimony for Greeks on behalf of this argument. She alone was willing to die on behalf of her husband [*andros*; 'man' means 'husband' in context], though his father and mother were alive; but through her love, she so much surpassed his parents in friendship that she showed them up as alien to their own son and only related to him in name [*onómati*]. (179b-c)

The familial terms in the above quote – daughter, husband, father, mother, and son – together with the contrast between lover and parents, forces us to think about the role of the family in human generation. Of all the animals, the family is unique to the human animal.[73] Generation through the family is thus the specifically *human* form of generation. The family is created and guaranteed by the laws of the city. The family owes its existence, its 'name' and recognition by other people, to the laws of the city. Insofar as the city is inseparable from the family, the city is integral to specifically *human* generation. The specifically *human* being thus participates in the larger natural cycle of birth, life and death by living in some form of political association. Thus, the city points beyond itself to the larger whole within which it occurs, to nature. Phaedrus' courageous man, the 'best' man, serves the good of the city, but since the good of the city points beyond itself to the good inherent in nature, ultimately the standard for the evaluation of the 'best' man must be found in nature.

---------- * ---------- * ----------

---

[73] Other higher gregarious primates have 'herds', 'packs', and so on, but this is qualitatively different from the human family. I will have more to say about this matter in the Socrates section below.

Philosophy is said to originate with the discovery of nature.[74] If Phaedrus could evaluate the 'best' man in terms of some natural standard, he would be a philosopher. But he is not a philosopher, he is a political man. Death accordingly remains as the limit of his analysis. Yet in spite of, or perhaps because of, this fact, he is altogether fascinated by it. Presumably, this is why he spends so much of his eulogy to Eros in a discussion of three examples of lovers and beloveds who were or were not willing to die for love (roughly half, 179b-180b). As I observed above, the willingness to die for another cannot simply be explained in terms of the political psychology of honour, since, being dead, the one who sacrifices will not be able to enjoy the honour. *Unless*, that is, we somehow live on after death. In the first example that he gives, that of Alcestis and Admetus, Alcestis dies for her beloved Admetus, but is nevertheless able to live on:

> Her performance of this deed was thought to be so *kalos* in the opinion not only of human beings but of the gods as well that, although there have been many who have accomplished many noble deeds, the gods have given to only a select number of them the guerdon of sending up their souls again from Hades, and hers they did send up in admiring delight at her deed. (179c)

According to Phaedrus, both humans and gods admire the willingness to sacrifice and ultimately die for another. Humans and gods are united in their opinion as to what is *kalos*. This agreement has the practical effect of both ratifying and justifying the humans' admiration. And when the humans die, they may finally meet the gods. If they die like Alcestis, they may even enjoy the honour of the gods in the after life, just as they have enjoyed the honour of humans in this life. In such a case, the gods thus nullify the significance of death. This point is underscored in the Alcestis myth by the fact that the gods so admired her deed that they sent her back to life again. Because of the gods, there can be, for the individual, life after death. The gods make the political understanding of courage viable, even in the face of death. This is perhaps the original purpose of the gods. The first extant traces we have of the Alcestis myth are found in Homer and Hesiod, and it is best known to us from Euripides' play *Alcestis*.[75] The poets serve the purposes of the city by making myths about the gods. As regards the problem of death, for the political man poetry and gods take the place of philosophy and nature.

---

[74] Leo Strauss *Natural Right and History* 82.

[75] Simon and Hornblower, 52.

The gods' admiration heightens the pleasure in the honour that attaches to a noble deed because the gods are so far above us. An essential part of what makes them so is their immortality. They seem to be literally larger than life. Yet the immortal gods also seem to admire the noble death above all noble deeds (179c). This is a rather curious thing, given that the one noble deed the immortal gods are absolutely incapable of is precisely this: a noble death. As Phaedrus presents it, the gods most admire in humans *not* god-like behaviour, but rather what they are themselves incapable of. In this, they are strangely like Phaedrus. As it turns out, in this most crucial respect, the gods are not above us after all. The united admiration of the gods for something other than or beyond themselves implies that something is above the gods. Carefully thought through (and Phaedrus has not done this), the implication of his argument is that the pre-eminently noble death is above both gods and humans.

It follows that one cannot then appeal to the gods for an *exemplification* of what constitutes a noble death (although they can still declare it). Rather, it must be reasoned about. As Phaedrus reasons it, what is integral to the noble death is not so much what it accomplishes as simply the sacrifice involved. We see this by the contrast he makes between Alcestis and Orpheus,[76] his second and central example. He implies that Orpheus was *not* willing to die for his beloved:

> Orpheus, the son of Oeargrus, they sent back from Hades unfulfilled; and though they showed him a phantom of his wife, for whom he had come, they did not give her very self to him, because it was thought he was soft, like the lyre player he was, and had not dared to die for love like Alcestis, but contrived to go into Hades alive. (179d)

Given the traditional account, Phaedrus does not really do justice to Orpheus. Orpheus descended into Hades alive, with a view to coming out alive with his wife. This does not *ipso facto* make him 'soft', or as Phaedrus means to imply by this, unmanly or uncourageous. Anyone who dares to go into Hades by that very fact dares to die. Phaedrus is simply wrong about Orpheus. The real reason Orpheus garners Phaedrus' condemnation is that he had hope of life. More precisely: he hoped on the basis of a plan that he himself had contrived. All such contrivances are acts of reason. This is the nub of the problem. To reason about Hades, which is what Orpheus had to have done in order to devise his plan, is necessarily to undercut the common opinions about it. The political understanding of courage is based on opinions that are ultimately underpinned by poetic myth, and in particular by myth about Hades. The political understanding of courage is based on received opinions. The medium of the political *qua* political is opinion and not reason. There is thus a necessary tension between reason and politics. Phaedrus condemns Orpheus because his willingness to die does not show itself as *simply* a sacrifice, but rather as a calculated risk, and calculation is not beautiful. The practical consequence of Orpheus' actions is to undercut the full force and effect of the unreasoned appeal to the gods.

---

[76] Briefly, the Orpheus story as it is commonly understood is that Orpheus descended into Hades to bring back his wife Eurydice, who had died of a snake bite. He enchanted Hades with his song, and was thus allowed to lead her out, provided he did not turn to look back at her while doing so. He failed at this, which is why he lost her. Because of his feat, he was thought to be especially competent to sing about the gods, and the Pythagoreans adopted him as their figurehead. See Simon and Hornblower, 1078.

Phaedrus' third and final example is the story of the death of the greatest of all Greek heroes, Achilles:

> For Achilles they sent away to the Isles of the Blest, because, though he had learned from his mother that he would be killed if he killed Hector, and that if he did not, he would return home and die in old age, still he dared to choose to come to the aid of his lover Patroclus; and with his vengeance accomplished, he dared not only to die on his behalf but to die for him who had died. (179e-a)

Achilles is more like Alcestis than Orpheus, and he accordingly receives much better treatment from Phaedrus. Like Alcestis, he chooses a course of action that he knows will result in death. Like her, he sacrifices simply. Like her, he receives the admiration of the gods for what they deem to be a *kalos* death. But there is this curious difference: unlike Alcestis, his death is not intended to bring anyone back to life. There is no sense here that Achilles will somehow save Patroclus. His death accomplishes nothing more than vengeance. Achilles is notoriously an angry and spirited man, rather than a reasonable and gentle man. And Achilles is, to reiterate, traditionally regarded as the greatest of the Greek heroes. He is the highest model upon which Greek men can pattern their lives. Anger and harshness are intrinsic to politics, apparently as a consequence of their basis in opinion and sentiment rather than in knowledge and reason.

It is useful to summarize what Phaedrus has accomplished to this point. He has provided an account of how eros leads to the great and beautiful deeds that are primarily associated with courageous men. The logical culmination of the sacrifice involved in such deeds is death, the willingness to sacrifice one's own life, and he has illustrated his argument with examples of three lovers, which he claims illustrate his views. There would not seem to be anything else for him to say. Yet he does not stop here. For some reason, he goes to great lengths to show that, contrary to popular opinion, Achilles is no lover but rather a beloved. He takes issue with Aeschylus as "talking nonsense" in claiming that Achilles was the lover, and, invoking the authority of Homer, offers three proofs that Achilles was in fact the beloved: he was a) more beautiful, b) unbearded, and c) the younger (180a).

It is not readily apparent how this contributes to his overall argument. But it does make sense if we consider what it implies for his own standing among men. On a very basic level, i.e., in erotic terms, it has the effect of likening him to Achilles: they are both beloveds. The three proofs that Phaedrus offers for Achilles as beloved are all passive qualities, and the beloved is understood to be essentially passive, especially in terms of his erotic relationship with his lover. And precisely because Achilles was the beloved and not the lover, the gods were even more impressed with him than they were with the lover Alcestis:

> [T]hough the gods really hold in high esteem that virtue which concerns love [*eröta*], they wonder, admire, and confer benefits even more when the beloved [*erömenos*] has affection [*agapâ*] for the lover [*erastën*] than when the lover [*erastës*] has it for the beloved [or 'boys'; *paidiká*]. (180b)

The gods admire most the affection of the beloved for the lover, which somehow makes the beloved's affection higher than the lover's eros. In elevating the beloved, Phaedrus elevates himself.

This elevation of the beloved creates problems for his argument, and in so doing tells us something about the nature of the gods. Phaedrus elevates the beloved above even the gods, for according to his express argument, Eros is a god. By contrast, affection (*agapâ*) is not. He means to say that the affection of the beloved is altogether human (and we should note that affection is what humans feel for gods). The effect of the elevation of the beloved is to elevate the humans above the gods. But having the gods understood as above the humans, as larger than life, is ultimately essential to his basic argument about the power of love. Phaedrus is thus caught in a contradiction that reveals the inadequacy of his argument. This contradiction is necessary in that it is merely a reflection of a basic contradiction in the nature of the gods themselves. If they are to be the ultimate ratification and justification of all human endeavour, then they must be utterly above and beyond us. Yet if they are to be humanly meaningful, they must also be somehow like us, beings with which we can somehow identify, which (among other things) means they are beings that admire the same things we admire. The problem is that they cannot be both, i.e., they cannot be what they must be if belief in them is to provide a solid foundation for politics.

Moreover, Phaedrus' elevation of the beloved has this curious implication: the gods admire most what is *not* godlike. The reason that the gods admire the beloved more than the lover is precisely that the lover is godlike inasmuch as he is infused with the god (Eros), and so cannot take full credit for his own actions:

> A lover [*erastēs*] is a more divine thing than a beloved [*paidikōn*], for he is full of the god. This is the reason why they honoured Achilles more than Alcestis and sent him to the Isles of the Blest. (180b)

At least in their admiration, then, the gods do not operate on the pederastic principle of 'like to like', but rather something more akin to 'opposites attract'. Whatever Phaedrus' motives for arguing thusly, this basic disposition of the gods makes sense if we think about it. It was first anticipated when Phaedrus developed his argument as to how eros directs one to virtue:

> [A]nd simply, as Homer said, 'the strength that the god breathed ' into some of the heroes, Eros supplies from himself to lovers. (179b)

According to Homer, Apollo breathes enough strength into a near-dead Hector to enable him to rouse his troops and pursue the Achaians in open warfare.[77] It is thus not clear how much 'Hector-heroism' is actually attributable to Hector, and how much to the god. In fact, examining the whole passage, Thoas and the Achaians seem much more impressive than Hector and the Trojans precisely because they are on their own. If, as Phaedrus argues, Eros supplies strength from himself to lovers in the same way that Homer said the gods breathe strength into the heroes, then the god Eros is largely responsible for whatever virtuous deeds come of this. If it is actually the god who does the deed, and the man is merely the medium through which the god accomplishes his deed, then by what right do we say the man is noble and admirable, rather than lucky and enviable?

---

[77] *Iliad*, 15.262.

5 Pausanius

> *And take care, my comrade, that the sophist doesn't deceive us with his praise of what he is selling, as do the merchant and the dealer in nourishment for the body. For they too do not know which of the wares they peddle is useful for the body and which worthless, any more than do their customers —unless one of the latter by some chance is a skilled trainer or a doctor. And yet they praise all that they sell.*
>
> (Protagoras 313c-d)

Our narrator Apollodorus tells us that, according to Aristodemus, after Phaedrus there were some other eulogies to eros "that he scarcely could recall" (180c). Accordingly, he skipped them and proceeded to Pausanius. A beloved and a lover are thus separated by some apparently forgettable people. Is there is a suggestion here that people who are neither tend to be forgettable? This might serve as a kind of quiet confirmation of one of the arguments that Socrates will later have his Diotima put forward: that eros can be understood in terms of the desire for "an immortal remembering" (208c-209e). Moreover, insofar as no such separation of speech or *logos* occurs anywhere else in the dialogue, it also has the effect of setting the *logos* of Phaedrus apart from that of all other speakers, but especially from that of Pausanius. This dramatic feature of the dialogue signals a break or a new tack in the argument of the dialogue. Pausanius, like Phaedrus before him, will in his way eulogize eros, but there is actually a great gap between them.

Pausanius begins with a criticism of Phaedrus that has the effect of dismissing his argument *in toto*:

> Phaedrus, in my opinion it is not noble the way the argument has been proposed to us – commanding us to eulogize Eros in so unqualified a fashion. For were Eros one, it would be noble, but as it is, it is not one; and as he is not one, it is more correct that it be declared before hand which Eros is to be praised.[78] (180c)

---

[78] Note the way that Pausanius uses the term 'noble' (*kalos*) here: it seems to be virtually synonymous with 'correct' (*orthos*). As the eulogy he is about to deliver will show, Pausanius differs from Phaedrus in that he has little appreciation of beauty in speech. 'Correctness' – both in the sense of precision in speech, and in the sense of the correctness of the opinion that the speech expresses (*orthodoxy*) – seems to take the place of beauty.

Eros as a whole cannot simply be *praised* if only one 'part' or 'kind' of it is in fact worthy of praise. Phaedrus apparently did not understand the different kinds of eros, or even for that matter that there are different kinds, and the implication is that he could thus not really have understood anything about it. Pausanius will argue that there are in fact two different kinds of love: a 'high' or a 'noble' love, which regards that which is most high or noble in people, and a 'low' or 'base' love, which regards that which is not. This basic point of his seems to be valid and well taken. If we think about it, we recognize that there are certain kinds of love which are better than others – indeed, that there are certain kinds of love which are altogether harmful. In fact, the more one thinks about it, the more one sees that the effects of love can be so very divergent that it becomes questionable whether what are often called different kinds of love are indeed different kinds, or rather different things altogether.

Pausanius begins his division of Eros into kinds as follows:

> We all know that there is no Aphrodite without Eros; and were she one, Eros would be one; but since there are two Aphrodites, it is necessary that there be two Erotes as well. (180d)

Eros is divided into two because Aphrodite is divided into two. The way that Pausanius proceeds, the first thing his division elucidates is not the quality of his two erotes, but rather the relational quality of both erotes or of eros per se. Eros is inseparable from Aphrodite, which means that eros is inherently relational.[79] Pausanius thus unwittingly anticipates the first argument Socrates will make about eros (199b-201c). There is an intriguing parallelism between the two cases: both men are lovers, and both begin with a correction of someone's beloved. Both lovers experience eros as inherently relational (even if they do not both explicitly argue for eros as inherently relational), whereas the beloveds they correct do not. The lover's eros leads him outside of himself and towards others in a way that the beloved never experiences. Phaedrus and Agathon, as beloveds, experience the attraction of others towards themselves, which encourages self-centeredness, although of course not self-sufficiency. They can be and are self-centred in a way that is simply not possible for lovers. The lover feels himself lacking or needful; his experience of eros intrinsically relates him to some other. An account of love that is given by a lover thus naturally tends to end up being about the beloved rather than the lover and the love, in which case it loses the phenomenon (cf. 204c). Pausanius' eulogy to Eros shows this tendency.[80] As soon becomes apparent, he is altogether fixated on the beloved, and this costs him in terms of self-knowledge and knowledge of love and the lover.

---

[79] If eros is inherently relational, then in order for it to exist there must be plurality. In order for there to be plurality, there must be difference. Pausanius relates Eros to Aphrodite, which means that Eros and Aphrodite must be different. The thing that most differentiates Eros and Aphrodite is that Eros is male and Aphrodite is female. This is of course not his point: the difference that Pausanius' makes explicit is that between 'high' and 'low' Eros. Nonetheless, the way that he utilizes the relationship between the god and goddess to begin his argument about 'high' and 'low' Eros causes one to wonder about the difference between male and female, and whether this difference is not the more important erotic difference. There is a certain irony to the fact that Pausanius is the one to introduce a feminine principle into the discussion of eros, given that – as soon becomes apparent – he is really altogether pre-occupied with relations between men.

We see from the above quotation that Pausanius proceeds on the basis of 'what we all know', and in particular of 'what we all know' about the gods; he proceeds on the basis of common opinion or convention. Pausanius, a thoroughly conventional man, presents a thoroughly conventional argument: since there are two Aphrodites, and since Eros goes with Aphrodite, there must be two Erotes as well. His appeal to traditional stories about the gods enables him to establish to common satisfaction the division of eros into two erotes without having actually to argue for it.[81] As this division is essential to his whole argument, his argument is not a radical one, not one which literally 'goes to the roots' of things.

For all the differences between them, Pausanius' argument is like Phaedrus' in respect of its conventionality. Pausanius is, however, more sophisticated, more aware of the man-made character of convention and the consequent ability of man to manipulate it. Briefly to anticipate arguments I will make below, it is because he himself wishes to manipulate erotic convention for his own benefit that he tries, to the full extent of his ability, to provide a thoroughly conventional explanation of eros. But, as it turns out, he is unable to construct this explanation apart from an appeal to nature, thus showing the limitations of conventional thinking. He explains the difference between the two Erotes in terms of the difference between the two Aphrodites upon which they depend. The two Aphrodites in turn originate in different gods, but this is not really what explains their difference. It is not possible finally to explain the quality of gods wholly in terms of still other gods. At some point, a rationally satisfying explanation must terminate in natural phenomena. According to the conventional understanding of the Aphrodites:

---

[80] Consider, for example, that the quality of the human lovers he discusses ends up being revealed by the quality of what they love (e.g., 181b), and that the nobility or lack of nobility of an erotic relationship ends up being determined almost entirely by the disposition of the beloved (184a-185c).

[81] That is, the current gods, the Olympians. In contrast to Phaedrus, who was entirely silent about the Olympians, Pausanius' argument explicitly appeals to them. Whereas Phaedrus appealed to the origin of politics in his praise of eros, Pausanius appeals to current politics, to current conventions and laws.

> One surely is the elder and has no mother, the daughter of Uranos, the one to whom we apply the name Uranian [i.e., heavenly]; the other is younger and the daughter of Zeus and Dione, the one we call Pandemus [lit. 'common to all the people']. (180d)

The elder Uranian Aphrodite is born only of the male, whereas the younger pandemian Aphrodite is born of both male and female. The Uranian is superior in view of her strictly male origin, as a result of which she partakes only of the male (and this is the love of boys), and age, as a result of which she does not partake of hubris (181c). In sum then, the Uranian Eros is superior because he depends upon the Uranian Aphrodite, who is superior because she partakes only of the male and is older. Pausanius either obfuscates or is unaware of the point, but in the end it comes down to age and sex: the meaning of the different erotes is finally explained through an appeal to nature, the natural attributes of age and sex.

However that may be, Pausanius does not pursue the 'natural' line of thinking. He rather develops his account of the high and low eros, the Uranian and pandemian, with what might be referred to as his 'principle of action':

> Every action is of the following sort: when being done in terms of itself, it is neither noble nor base. For example, what we are now doing, either drinking, singing, or conversing, none of these things is in itself a noble thing, only in terms of how it is done in the doing of it does it turn out to be the sort of thing that it is. For if it is done nobly and correctly, it proves to be noble, and if incorrectly, base. (180e-a)

As this principle of action plays a vitally important role in his argument, it needs to be considered carefully. His point is that no action is simply noble or base, but that it can only be characterized as such in terms of how it is done "in the doing of it". The tortured language is intended to emphasize a peculiar feature of how he would have us understand action: in isolation from its end or purpose. He chooses three examples to illustrate his principle of action: drinking, singing, and conversing. These are all associated with parties or other convivial gatherings. The party at hand, the party of *Symposium*, is a party of the cream of Athenian society, a 'high class' party. Their drinking, singing, and conversing could be expected to be done well, or 'correctly', or 'nobly'. By contrast, the drinking, singing, and conversing of a party of 'low class' people – uneducated poor people, for example – could be expected to be done 'incorrectly', or 'basely'. Pausanius is a snob. What he means is that things done nobly or correctly are done with 'style', or 'grace', or refined and elegant manners. According to his principle of action, action is to be evaluated against the standard of high-class manners rather than its end or purpose.

But the question then immediately arises as to how we are to recognize high-class manners. Pausanius never provides an explicit answer to this question, which means that we must try to. The conventional quality of his speech immediately suggests to us a facile answer: high-class manners are simply conventional, and hence so too are the standards whereby they are recognized as such. Eructations at the dinner table are perfectly fine in some parts of the world, not so in others; what constitutes high-class manners must be determined against conventional standards which inhere in various given ways of life or 'societies'. And within any given society, high-class manners are simply what the elite of society deems them to be. But the facile answer is, even if true, inadequate. For to say that standards of high-class manners are conventional in no way implies that there is no natural basis for them. To assert that the standards are simply or finally conventional is implicitly to assume a radical separation between the natural and the conventional which cannot in the end be justified, for *all* given ways of life are, as *ways* of life, a response to nature. Since manners are integral to *any* given way of life,[82] there must be some non-arbitrary connection between manners and nature, notwithstanding the fact that there is indeed much about manners that is simply arbitrary.

There is a natural basis for high-class manners if there is a natural high class or elite, for then the question of what constitutes high-class manners is simply settled with reference to the manners of the natural high class or elite. The manners of the natural high-class are on display as they go about their lives, in seriousness and in play. The first words of Xenophon's *Symposium* are:

---

[82] As a little thought shows. They inform our conduct towards one another in just about any situation where people interact, including matters as diverse as shared meals, any common work effort, any common recreational activity, funerals, and travel arrangements. Human life apart from manners is not really imaginable.

> But in my opinion, not only are the serious deeds of gentlemen worth recalling, but so too are their deeds done in times of play. I wish to make clear those deeds at which I was present and on the basis of which I make this judgment. (Xenophon, *Symposium*, I(1))

The word 'gentlemen' above translates *kaloi k'agathoi*, which literally means 'noble and good (men)'. The Greek word became bastardised through common usage, much as is the case with the English 'gentlemen', but Xenophon means to appeal to the literal sense: it is worthwhile to recall the deeds of noble and good men in seriousness and in play. Men who really are noble and good are the men who constitute the natural high class, which presumes that there is a truth about the noble and good. The reason why it is important to recall the deeds of gentlemen even at play is because they can then be emulated; the natural high class teach by example. What the people of the natural high class do in times of play indicate to us in what they take their pleasure, it indicates *their* tastes, and *our* tastes are educable. In the dialogue *Protagoras*, Socrates says, in a comment that Plato almost surely intends to reflect upon this dialogue:

> For this sort [paltry and rustic human beings], because of their inability to be together with each unto themselves, through their own voices and speeches of their own – such is their lack of education – bid up the price of flute girls, and pay large fees to hire the extraneous voice of the flutes and carry on their association through those other voices. But when the drinking companions are gentlemen and have been educated, you won't see flute girls, dancing girls, or harp girls. Instead, to be together among themselves by means of their own voices is enough, without such trivial and childish things of that sort, taking their turns at speaking and listening in good order, even after having drunk a lot of wine. (347c-d)

Taking turns speaking and listening in good order, after having dismissed the flute girl (176e), are precisely what Plato presents the cream of Athenian society doing in his *Symposium*. These gentlemen are amusing themselves by each in turn giving a eulogy to Eros. It is clear both that there are very few men who could actually be amused by this sort of thing, and that this amusement is indeed superior to the amusement of the paltry and rustic human beings to whom Socrates refers. What these few do while amused in this way, *their* manner of behaviour, constitutes a natural standard of high-class manners.

Yet Pausanius does not make this argument explicit. This is odd. He obviously sees himself as 'high-class', so why then would he not argue a natural basis for his own high-class position, as would seem to have the effect of strengthening that position? Perhaps he has not recognized the basis of high-class manners in a *natural* high-class. Yet even if he has, he can hardly make this natural basis explicit, for two reasons. First of all, Pausanius is an exemplar of that altogether bizarre breed of human being, the elitist democrat, which is, interestingly, what the 'intellectuals' of any democracy tend to be. Although Pausanius sees himself as a member of the Athenian elite, he also sees himself as an Athenian citizen, and he is accordingly informed by the morality of the Athenian regime, which is democratic. This democratic dimension of his psyche is the inevitable result of his conventionalism. Because his conventionalism necessarily closes him to any transpolitical perspective, there can be no higher authority for him than the conventions of the polis, which – practically speaking – tends to mean the polis in which he chances to exist, and he chances to exist in democratic Athens. We see much evidence for the authority Athens has over him. He will spend most of his speech (roughly three quarters, 182a-184c) on how erotic relations are governed in various cities, but mainly in Athens, and the discussion of how they are governed elsewhere only serves to illustrate the superiority how they are governed 'here' (in Athens). And as conventional political analyses tend to use what is familiar to determine what is best, erotic conventions 'here' predictably turn out to be much finer than elsewhere (182d). As a conventional man, Pausanius is altogether bound by the 'here and now'. The morality of his 'here and now' is democratic, and the fundamental law that guarantees this morality is the law of equality. The law of equality is above all else a law that states that all desires and pleasures are 'equal', and consequently that all pleasure-seekers must be honoured on an equal basis (*Republic*, 561b-c). Nothing so annoys, and in the end even enrages, the democrat so much as to argue that there is a natural hierarchy of desires and pleasures. Yet this is precisely the effect of arguing that there is a natural basis for high-class manners in a natural high-class.

Secondly, Pausanius has a hard time explicitly arguing a natural basis for *anything* because he has what might fairly be characterized as a 'love/hate' relationship with nature. He cannot avoid justifying his high Uranian love through an appeal to nature (181c), but at the same time he recognizes that nature is at variance with his purpose in his eulogy to eros. Natural eros most simply understood clearly serves the purpose of procreation. Human beings procreate through the erotic union of the sexes; the relationship between the sexes as such is erotic. Arguably the most massive single fact about humanity is that it is divided into two 'tribes', the male and the female, and the *only* conceivable explanation for this is the roles that each play in the sexual division of labour. The pleasure that attaches to sexual congress between a man and a woman leads beyond itself to generation, and can be understood as nature's injunction to men and women to procreate. By contrast, the pleasure that attaches to sexual congress between a man and a man does not lead beyond itself in this way, and hence it is much more difficult to attribute any higher natural purpose to it. The most obvious natural purpose of sexual pleasure is procreation, which would seem to imply that nature supports heterosexuality rather than homosexuality. But Pausanius is primarily motivated by homosexual pleasure. The guiding purpose of his eulogy to eros is to offer a justification for, and a celebration of, his own pederastic practices. All of his arguments must bend to this guiding purpose, which means that he cannot argue too directly for a natural justification of his high Uranian love, and which explains why he asserts a principle of action that has the effect of analytically divorcing action from the purpose for which it was undertaken.

The purpose of an action creates a natural standard against which it can be evaluated: an action is well done if it accomplishes its purpose. Of course, one no sooner says that, than the question of what justifies the purpose comes to mind. This is nothing more than to say that we have always to wonder about our purposes. But the effect of Pausanius' principle of action is to render the purpose-oriented evaluation of action impossible. Given the context in which Pausanius enunciates his principle of action, it might seem to be of limited scope and so fairly benign. But his express claim is that *every action* (*pâsa... prâxis*) is as he states: neither noble nor base in and of itself (180e). His principle of action is stated in perfectly general terms, and if we were to take it seriously as a general principle, it would have horrible effects. To see what is at stake here, we might try to think of concrete applications of his principle. For example, his principle tells us that the action of murder is, in and of itself, neither noble nor base, but that it could be either, depending on how it is done. This would seem to show that the principle is false, inasmuch as it is not possible to murder in a noble fashion: murder is always or simply base. But it is necessary to pursue the issue a little deeper, and ask: what is murder? It is the unjustified killing by one human being of another human being. *Murder* is base by definition, whereas the *killing* of another human being may be fully justified. The real issue here is killing, and our assessment of this action necessarily turns on the ends of the action, or the purpose for which it is done. Consequently, the effect of Pausanius' principle of action is that we cannot distinguish, for example, cold-blooded 'contract' killing for hire from killing in self-defence. His principle of action is contrary to the rational basis of the law against murder, a law that would seem to be essential to any sort of functioning society. His principle evaluates actions as noble or base only according to whether they are done in the right way, in the right 'manner' – with 'style' – but he offers no rational basis for right manners, as he might have done, for example, by trying to ground them in the manners of the naturally superior, i.e., in the natural high class. His principle really amounts to manners for the sake of style. Aware of its implications, nobody could believe that this is adequate. If people were in fact consciously guided by his principle, they would have to think that their own actions were ultimately unimportant and meaningless in themselves. This is nihilism; he actually leads us to the edge of a nihilistic abyss.

Pausanius, of course, thinks of his principle of action mainly in terms of erotic activity. Some love is, "in the doing of it," noble, while other love turns out base. He first addresses the base pandemian love:

> Now the Eros who belongs to Aphrodite Pandemus is truly pandemian and acts in any sort of way. And here you have the one whom the paltry human beings have as their love. Those who are of the same sort as this love are, first of all, no less in love with women than with boys; secondly, they are in love with their bodies rather than their souls; and thirdly, they are in love with the stupidest there can be, for they have an eye only to the act and are unconcerned with whether it is noble or not. That is how it happens that it turns out for them, however it turns out, with the same likelihood of its being good as the opposite. (181b)

The pandemian lover acts in any which way, and so his actions turn out any which way. He acts in any which way because he does not have discriminating tastes: he loves women just as much as boys, bodies more than souls, hence prefers the stupid to the wise. This is low class. Someone with discriminating tastes is not satisfied with just anything, but wants the best. The wine connoisseur is not indifferent between *Lonesome Charlie* and *Dom Perignon*; someone with taste in music is not indifferent between Rap and Mozart. Pausanius' point is that an indiscriminating taste is evidence of a lack of grace or poor manners, and, as such, indicates baseness. The pandemian lover loves in an indiscriminate manner, and this makes him a base lover. Whereas anyone with taste and intelligence knows that (by nature) the soul is higher than the body, the wise higher than the stupid.

To give Pausanius his due, his argument *does* make a certain amount of sense. Certainly anyone whose actions did have literally the same likelihood of turning out bad as good would be base. The problem is that Pausanius cannot find a way to make his principle of action justify his own discriminating eros. Discriminating lovers – in contrast to pandemian lovers – turn, he says, to the male, to that which is "naturally more vigorous and has more mind [*nous*]" (181c). It is easy enough to discriminate between the male and the female, and he would have us acknowledge that the male is superior in respect of vigour and mind. As he explains it, the real issue here is vigour and mind, and this is not so easy to discriminate. He never gives any satisfactory indication as to how we are to make this discrimination among males, who obviously differ in respect of vigour and mind. He takes his discrimination to the point of love of males, but is unable satisfactorily to carry it through to its logical culmination in the discriminating love of certain *special* males. This problem comes into focus as Pausanius develops his idea of the high Uranian eros, which he identifies with the proper practice of pederasty: "And one might recognize in pederasty itself those who have been prompted purely by this kind of love; for they do not love boys except when the boys start having mind [*nous*], and this is close to the time when the beard first appears" (181d). There is again something to what he is saying: young boys have less mind than older boys, and it is a more or less valid empirical generalization that mind develops in boys especially around the time that the beard begins to appear. But obviously this is quite inadequate; the presence of a beard is not an indication of intelligence. Many dim-witted men wear beards. The difficulty Pausanius has is that mind (*nous*) is a quality of soul, and he is unable adequately to discriminate on that basis. One suspects this does not really bother him because he actually cares more for body than for soul.

There is a curious lack of symmetry between the Uranian and pandemian love, which carefully considered lays bare the sophistical quality of Pausanius' speech. The argument that the male is naturally superior in respect of a part of ourselves with which we readily identify our humanity (vigour and mind) implies that the female is naturally inferior. Since the Uranian love unambiguously pertains to the love of the male (according to Pausanius), and since there are only two sexes, it seems that the corresponding category should be one that unambiguously pertains to the love of female. Since the Uranian love of the male turns out to be noble on the basis of the natural superiority of the male, logically there should be a corresponding love of female that is base on the basis of the natural inferiority of the female. This is certainly the conclusion he would like to advance, but he is not able openly to adopt that position because it is a manifest absurdity. The love of the female is procreative – if that were base, then he would have to say that the continued existence of the human race is base. The males that he loves are born of females; an outright condemnation of heterosexuality is simply not a possibility. Nature gets in his way, and so he needs some sort of sophistical trick to get around it. This is the point where his 'principle of action' does its most important work. If erotic matters are primarily a question of style or manners, then the two erotic categories can plausibly be said to be good and poor mannered love, which is how he presents his Uranian and pandemian love. Because good style involves discriminating taste and poor style involves undiscriminating taste, he can speak of the noble Uranian love as unambiguously male without having to face the embarrassing necessity of speaking of the base pandemian love as unambiguously female: whereas the noble Uranian lover shows his good style by his discriminating taste for what is best (the male), the base pandemian lover shows his poor style by his indiscriminating taste (loving indiscriminately the male and the female). Pausanius talks as though the basic erotic options were homosexuality and bisexuality, rather than homosexuality and heterosexuality, and it is his 'principle of action' that allows him to accomplish this. But this is clearly false. Bisexuality is a composite of heterosexuality and homosexuality; the basic erotic options are really heterosexuality and homosexuality. His 'principle of action' allows him to obfuscate what the basic erotic options are, and this strengthens the justification of his own erotic preference.

His eros is, to reiterate, primarily directed towards body rather than soul, notwithstanding the impression he strives to create with his rhetoric. A general preoccupation with body is individuating, and tends naturally towards selfishness. Pausanius can hardly express his love of boys in terms of his own selfish desire to enjoy their bodies. He is compelled to express his love of boys in terms of a concern for their well-being. Those who start to love boys at the right time, he says, the time when the beard starts to appear, "are in a position I believe to be with him and live with him for their whole life and not – once they have deceived and seized a young and foolish youth – to laugh at him and then run away to another" (181d). The true lover is the constant lover, who would never do anything to slight his beloved. Ostensibly to encourage the right kind of love, he proposes:

> There should have been a law [*nómon*][83] as well to prohibit the loving of [supposedly pre-beard cum pre-mind] boys, in order that a lot of zeal would not have been wasted for an uncertain result; for it is not clear where the perfection of boys has its end with regard to the vice and virtue of both soul and body. (181e)

Thus is introduced what will from this point forward become the dominant theme of his eulogy to eros: the laws. Pausanius proposes a law, and then argues for it. As his whole speech now becomes an argument for a change in law, it is an example of the kind of rhetoric we find in political assembly, i.e., it is an example of deliberative rhetoric, and it is the only example of deliberative rhetoric to be found in the entire Platonic corpus.[84] As such, it can be expected to be instructive as to the quality of deliberative rhetoric. The rhetoric is rooted in the character of Pausanius' eros. As his rhetoric conveys the first mention of the word 'law' in the entire dialogue, we may wonder whether there is a special relationship between law and eros, and whether laws regulating erotic expression might not be fundamental. The law that Pausanius proposes sounds at first as though it is directed towards the good of others; it sounds as though it is directed towards the perfection of boys, i.e., to a group of which he is not a part. And as the city obviously has a general interest in making its boys grow up to be as good as possible, the law could be understood as directed towards the general good. The law does not at first sound like one that has any specific connection to Pausanius' own particular good. Yet if we attend carefully to what he says, we observe that the primary purpose of the law is to forestall a waste of effort. But a waste of effort on whose part? Certainly not on the part of the boys, who thus far have appeared only as the object of love. It is clear that the law saves the effort of the lover; the law works primarily to the advantage of the lover. Pausanius proposes the law on his own behalf as a lover, i.e., for his own advantage. This points to a practical problem with deliberative rhetoric and hence *actual* laws. Actual laws are generally proposed to serve the advantage of whoever proposes them. Yet whoever proposes them cannot simply admit to this fact. It is not effective, for example, openly to proclaim: *I want you to vote for this law, because it will make me rich*. This would be, to say the least, poor rhetoric. It is impossible to gather support for a proposal if that proposal evidently serves no higher good than the self-interest of the one proposing it. Whoever proposes a law must always claim that the law serves the good of others or the general good. Practical political deliberation is thus seriously limited in that it is – as often as not – impossible to discuss in a fully candid fashion what is really at issue in the deliberation. The laws must be less than perfect as a consequence of this limitation.

---

[83] The Greek word for 'law', *nómos*, encompasses a range of related but different meanings, and this should be kept in mind throughout *Symposium*. In its primary sense, the word means 'place of pasturage', 'habitation', or 'dwelling place', and hence 'district' and 'sphere of command'. It thus comes to refer to that which is in habitual practice, use or possession. These things may or may not be formally enacted by some sort of assembly, and may or may not be written down or codified. Thus *nómos* encompasses both what is today meant by 'law', as well as 'custom' or 'convention'. The essential thing to understand is that *nomos* is authoritative, and authoritative because *recognized* as such, and that hence its 'mode of being' is 'conventional'. It expresses an opinion which is in some sense binding; law is for Pausanius the opinion of the city, in whatever form it may take (cf. *Minos*, 314c).

[84] Strauss *City and Man* 134.

This practical political problem is closely related to the fact that virtually no one considers the law as a whole. What is typically at issue in political deliberation about law is *this* or *that* law, and virtually never the law *as a whole*. Pausanius wishes to deliberate erotic law, and he is accordingly armed with a lot of information about it. He is an 'expert' on erotic law. He knows about the law pertaining to that in which he is interested (pederastic relations). He does not know about the law as a whole, either in the theoretical sense of law in general, or in the practical sense of the whole of Athenian law. As he lacks expertise on the law as a whole, he cannot know how the erotic law he is proposing will affect the law as a whole, or vice versa. He thus cannot really be an expert on erotic law after all. In principle, complete expertise on a part of the law is not possible apart from expertise on the whole of the law. Only the 'expert' on the law as a whole could be expected to understand the true purpose of the law, and hence the natural standard against which laws can be evaluated. As those who create the individual laws, the politicians, typically lack knowledge of the whole of the law, the individual laws are typically created in a sub-optimal fashion.

Yet, notwithstanding this fact, in creating the individual laws, politicians somehow divine the true purpose of the laws, for it is reflected in the rhetoric through which the laws come into being, inasmuch as every political proposal has to be expressed in terms of what is good for the whole city, or the common good. While there is obviously much debate as to what substantially constitutes the common good, no one seriously debates that the laws are indeed supposed to be for the sake of the common good. But this problem of the common good, what is good for the whole city, leads ineluctably to the problem of the city properly understood; it leads to the problem of the good city or the best city. The problem of the best city is the central theme of classical political philosophy. Political rhetoric thus points to political philosophy, much as I have argued politics point to nature. For the classics, the true purpose of the law obtains when it builds individual character, or when it develops virtue amongst the citizenry.[85] Virtue is the explicit theme of Pausanius' legal discourse. Although we have reason to suspect that Pausanius cares less for virtue than he professes to, we can nevertheless expect that his speech contain much insight as to the relationship between the laws and their purpose.[86]

If the true purpose of the law is indeed to make people – or more precisely citizens – virtuous, then it would follow that the laws could serve no purpose for a city composed of already virtuous citizens. There is a sense in which the law is simply irrelevant for the virtuous, for they would act the same with or without it. Pausanius says of the law that he proposes that "the good willingly lay down this law upon themselves" (181e). The good willingly accept the law because it fits in with their characteristically good conduct or good manners.[87] But whence this goodness? The rhetorical effect of Pausanius' speech taken as a whole is to endow the laws with a fantastic kind of power, such as is able to mold the character of people everywhere, one senses, into virtually anything, and in particular to mold good people. Yet the first good people that he references in the context of the laws are good apart from the laws. This implies that there must be a non-conventional high class of human being; his argument again points to the natural high class. As they are good by nature, nature is a power that accomplishes in them what he attributes to the laws.

---

[85] Cf. Plato, *Laws*, 630c, 630e-b, *Republic*, 501a-502c, 589c-d, 590d-e; Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1179b31-1180a13, *Politics*, 1253a29-1253b1, 1333a11-1333a16.
[86] Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1331b24-1331b39

If the true purpose of the law is to make citizens virtuous, then it must be directed towards the many who are not naturally so; the many are the real problem for the laws (cf. Aristotle *Nicmachean Ethics* 1179a33-1180b27). Because the many do not willingly choose the good law for themselves, they must rather be compelled to accept it. The many are, in the language of Pausanius, the pandemian lovers, and this is precisely the position he adopts with respect to them:

> … but there should have been applied the same sort of compulsory prohibition to those pandemian lovers [i.e., the prohibition against indulging in the wrong sort of boys], just as we compel them as far as we can not to love freeborn women. (181e-a)

The laws create virtue where none would otherwise exist by forcing it onto people. This issue of course arises in the specific context of erotica, which causes us to wonder if perhaps the primary purpose of the laws is not to manage the citizens' erotic drives, both for their own good and for the good of the city as a whole. It is inconceivable that a city could exist apart from some sort of erotic management. Eros as we actually experience it is primarily a wild or untamed kind of thing, which is perforce apolitical, and which must therefore be tamed to at least some extent if it is to be consistent with civilized life. And it must be *tamed*, rather than simply ignored or eliminated, if for no other reason than that for the city to continue to exist, it must generate new citizens, and this is done in a manifestly erotic fashion. The eros of the citizens is civilized most importantly through the family, which attaches to eros a meaning that is not simply natural, but at least partly conventional. The family is supported by the laws and the gods of the city. The law prohibiting the loving of freeborn women is such a law: in prohibiting coitus with freeborn women outside of marriage, it promotes the family by promoting marriage and the chastity of women.

---

[87] We see here the way that his principle of action leads naturally to his discussion of law.

Law creates the moral framework within which the individual virtue of each of the citizens can grow and flourish to the utmost extent of their natures. But the citizens cannot be compelled to behave in a moral fashion if it is not clear to them precisely what the law commands. The law Pausanius proposes is not practical because it is not clear in this way. We can see this problem by comparing it to the law regarding women. The law prohibiting the loving of freeborn women is an actual law, and it is feasible as such because it is clear what it commands: everyone can recognize women and so everyone can follow rules that proscribe certain behaviour towards them. Laws that have people as their objects, in order to be feasible, must refer to attributes of them that are readily recognizable. Qualities of body are (for the purposes of law, women are identified by *physical* rather than *psychical* attributes), whereas qualities of soul are not. Pausanius' proposed law for pandemian lovers, proscribing certain behaviour towards the 'wrong' kind of boys, is not feasible because the 'wrong' kind of boys is defined precisely by qualities of soul. The ability to discriminate boys in the manner in which Pausanius' law is ostensibly intended to discriminate requires, at a minimum, lovers with the ability to identify mind (*nous*) in boys. But Pausanius himself lacks this ability, and so instead falls back upon a visible bodily attribute: mind (*nous*) starts to develop in boys around the time the beard first appears. He uses a bodily attribute to draw an inference about a quality of soul because, having no real knowledge of soul, he can do no better. This shows us what would happen if his proposal was actually turned into law: the law would, as practical matter, end up being based on some readily recognizable bodily attribute which could be said roughly to correspond to the relevant quality of soul. But this is obviously inadequate if the ostensible purpose of the law is actually to be achieved. The ability to discriminate among boys on the basis of qualities of soul requires reliable means of assessing mind or soul, the kind of means we associate with Socrates, and which is on display throughout the whole of the Platonic corpus in the form of his dialectical interrogations. Pausanius' law is utterly impractical because the discrimination that it entails would require a philosopher to make it. Moreover, if the philosopher's discrimination were to be practically relevant to the city in the same sense that law is intended to be practically relevant, then it would have to have the same force and effect as law. This would in turn require that the philosopher's will rule the city absolutely, i.e., it would require a Philosopher-King. Perhaps this is why the first mention of the word 'philosophy' in *Symposium* occurs in Pausanius' speech (182c): his legal argument points to an objective the attainment of which actually requires philosophy in place of the laws.

Of all the paradoxical notions generated by Plato, probably the most famous is that the only real solution to human problems lies in the Philosopher-King (*Republic*, 473c-e). Direct political rule by a philosopher is, to say the least, most unlikely. This is true for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the difficulty people generally have in recognizing a philosopher. Pausanius' speech draws our attention to this problem. He is trying to justify his pederastic practices, to say that pederasty properly practiced is a great and noble thing. But this argument is difficult to sell, for there is a widespread perception of pederasty as a base thing. What accounts for that? Usually, where there is smoke, there is fire. Pausanius can talk *ad infinitum* about the benefits of pederasty, but people, as they say, 'know what they know'. Unless he can explain clearly and directly why pederasty has such an (undeserved) bad reputation, he will never achieve his objectives. Pausanius explains the bad reputation of pederasty with reference to pandemian lovers:

> For here you have those who have made pederasty a disgrace, so that some have the nerve to say that it is shameful to gratify lovers. They say it is shameful with an eye to those pandemian lovers, observing their impropriety and injustice, since surely any action whatsoever that is done in an orderly and lawful way would not justly bring reproach (181e).

There are certain no-good low class people out there, he asserts, pandemian lovers, who practice pederasty, and who inevitably practice it poorly, and this is what accounts for the ill repute of pederasty. People cannot generally distinguish, he implies, proper Uranian pederasty from pandemian pederasty. Because of this inability, all pederasty gets a bad reputation.[88] The problem that he claims to have is like the problem with which Socrates is confronted.[89] Socrates tries to justify philosophy, which like pederasty has a bad reputation, and he too has a hard time of it. But in his case, it is because people are generally unable to distinguish between the philosopher and the sophist. The main reason for this is that they are unable to distinguish between philosophical and sophistical arguments. Perhaps the greatest political problem that the philosopher Socrates faces is that the sophist Pausanius *sounds* like him. For if people think that men like Pausanius are philosophers, this makes the notion of actual philosophical rule of the city preposterous. This of course can only detract from the political efficacy of philosophy. If it is true, as Plato seemed to think, that the only solution to human problems lies in the Philosopher-King, then the extent of the harm caused by sophistical 'pretenders to the throne' can hardly be exaggerated.

---

[88] But one wonders why pandemian lovers would bring the whole practice of pederasty into ill repute, for given the way that he has described them, it would be the easiest thing in the world to distinguish the pandemian from the Uranian, and according to his express argument, pandemian lovers are *not* to be simply identified with improper pederasty.

---------- * ---------- * ----------

It would follow that one of the greatest political teachings Plato could impart is *how* to distinguish the sophist from the philosopher. It is a virtue of Pausanius' speech that, properly considered, it helps in this task. And in showing us how to distinguish the

---

Why would the pandemians' improper practice of pederasty not just bring themselves into ill repute, much as he implies their other improper practices bring them into ill repute? His explanation for the ill repute of pederasty works if and only if most people cannot distinguish the proper practice of pederasty from the improper practice of pederasty, but we have no reason to believe that this would indeed be the case. In any event, he avoids speaking simply of distinguishing proper from improper pederasty, because to do so would necessarily point to a base love of boys by men who are exclusively interested in boys. If he explicitly recognizes that possibility, then his whole argument that base love is indiscriminating love – and hence a question of poor style or manners – begins jto unravel. Men who are exclusively interested in boys are, to that extent at least, discriminating lovers. This is the way his own discriminating tastes run. In order to achieve his objectives, he has to hide his own motives, and this entails deflecting attention from the true reason for the ill repute of pederasty. So he confuses the issue with reference to the low class pandemian lovers. His argument here is another piece of sophistry.

[89] This similarity is one of several which form the basis of an odd sort of parallel between Pausanius and Socrates, upon which it is profitable to reflect. To understand the ways in which Pausanius and Socrates are the same and different is to understand the ways in which the sophist and the philosopher are the same and different, which is at once to understand something about each individually. I will pursue this matter further below.

sophist from the philosopher, it also shows us *why* it is necessarily politically difficult to do so. Pausanius' speech reveals at least two closely related elements of the problem.

First, there is the issue of the stance that each takes towards convention. Pausanius' argument is conventional because he sees his best hope of attaining the goods that he values most highly as lying in conventional means. By contrast, Socrates sees no conventional means to the goods he values most highly. As I noted above, Pausanius' conventional argument proceeds on the basis of 'what we all know', and in particular on the basis of 'what we all know' about the gods. As we saw from Phaedrus' eulogy, the gods ultimately underpin the common opinions about what is noble. The common opinions about what is noble constitute a common good, for they make possible a common way of life. Pausanius' conventional argument is inherently exploitive, for it uses common opinions, and in particular common opinions about the gods, (which he almost surely does not himself believe) as instrumental to his own individual good, and it does so in such a way as to derogate from the common good of a shared religion. Immediately after making the distinction between Uranian and pandemian eros, Pausanius says, "all the gods must be praised, but one must still try to say what has been allotted to each god" (180e). This statement, though equivocal, might be interpreted as supporting the common opinions about the gods, i.e., as pious. But shortly after making it, he says "Eros as a whole is not noble nor deserving of a eulogy, but only that Eros who provokes one to love in a noble way" (181a). The direct implication is that not all the gods are worthy of praise. Although Pausanius' conventional argument proceeds on the basis of the common understanding of the gods, it actually derogates from that common understanding inasmuch as it encourages the belief that not all the gods are worthy of praise. As Pausanius' conventional argument is ultimately motivated by self-interest, we see here the tendency for selfish conventionalism to issue in impiety. Pious people will perceive Pausanius' impiety, and they will accordingly view him with suspicion and even hostility, and rightfully so, but not all impiety is of a piece. Much as Pausanius argues we must distinguish among different types of eros, so too we must distinguish among different types of impiety, and this is something that the city is constitutionally incapable of doing. The city cannot distinguish the impiety of Pausanius from the impiety of Socrates who, as we learn from Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, was condemned for it. Yet there is nonetheless this essential difference of *purpose* between them: the impiety of Socrates was not born primarily of self-interest or love of self, but rather of love of truth. To oversimplify for the sake of clarity, the fact that Pausanius makes arguments not primarily out of a love of truth but rather with a view to his own self-interest makes him a sophist;[90] the fact that Socrates makes arguments obversely makes him a philosopher.

Second, the city cannot distinguish between sophistry and philosophy because, as I have said, sophistical and philosophical arguments must *sound* the same. Pausanius begins his eulogy to Eros by dividing it into what are arguably its constituent parts, i.e., he begins with what sounds like a clarification of the nature of eros. He thus seems to begin his eulogy with an argument we might expect from Socrates. In the Platonic dialogue *Phaedrus*, Socrates discusses in some detail the rational activity of dividing as part of 'dialectics', the Socratic mode of philosophical argument. In that dialogue, Socrates says that he is a lover (*erastes*) of 'dividings' (*diaireseon*) and 'collectings' (*sunagogon*) – analysis and synthesis – as what enables him to speak and think, and he calls those who on this basis are able to see the natural unity and plurality of things 'dialecticians' (*dialektikous*, *Phaedrus* 266b). One might reasonably infer then that Pausanius begins his eulogy with an exercise in the analytical part of dialectics; it is reasonable for the city to infer that Pausanius speaks in a Socratic fashion. Now as it turns out, this inference is wrong. Socrates elucidates the analytical part of dialectics as: "Being able to dissect a thing in accordance with its forms, following the natural joints and not trying to hack it apart like an incompetent butcher" (*Phaedrus*, 265e). His imagery makes it clear that a valid analysis follows divisions that are already inherent in nature. By contrast, Pausanius' division of eros makes no attempt to follow divisions inherent in nature, but is rather explicitly based on conventional – and, for him, convenient – notions about the gods.[91] Here surely is a fine distinction that must be altogether lost upon the *demos*.

---

[90] This definition, while sufficient for most practical purposes, is not quite complete. Strauss considers the sophist as follows:

> But this is clearly too general, for unconcern with the truth about the whole is not a preserve of the sophist. The sophist is a man who is unconcerned with the truth, or does not love wisdom, although he knows better than most other men that wisdom or science is the highest excellence of man. Being aware of the unique character of wisdom, he knows that the honour deriving from wisdom is the highest honour. He is concerned with wisdom not for its own sake, not because he hates the lie in the soul more than anything else, but for the sake of the honour or prestige that attends wisdom. He lives or acts on the principle that prestige or superiority to others or having more than others is the highest good. He acts on the principle of vulgar conventionalism. (Strauss *Natural Right and History* 116)

We can infer that Socrates did not believe in the gods of the city because his dialectical method showed him that the common opinions about the gods could not be true. Yet this same method also showed him the great importance of the gods for a wholesome common way of life, and that the gods cannot exist apart from commonly held opinions about them, i.e., it showed him the tenuous basis of the gods. Consequently, he understood the great importance of apparent respect for them. Socrates' impiety thus also differs from Pausanius' in that Socrates typically makes a serious effort to exemplify piety.[92] Yet since his essential philosophical activity (insofar as it involves dialogue with others) necessarily questions the gods, he cannot always be wholly successful in this endeavour. Thus, the city's charge against him of impiety must be justified: it is true that Socrates necessarily derogates from the city by contradicting commonly held opinions about the gods.

---------- * ---------- * ----------

But Socrates was hardly the first to be guilty of this crime. While this observation is, of course, not an adequate defence against the charge of a capital crime, it is nevertheless important in helping us to put that charge into its proper context. The proper context is the political context, and as it turns out, the political context is provided by what I have referred to as the political progression of the speeches of *Symposium*. There is a political story to be told in the movement from the speech of Phaedrus to that of Pausanius. With the speech of Phaedrus, Plato shows us, as I have argued, the basic psychic orientation of the original political man. Briefly to reiterate, Phaedrus is the first and only speaker to equate the good with the ancestral, and in so doing, he implicitly points to the origin of politics. The city cannot come fully into existence if what it is essentially defined by, its laws and conventions, are open to criticism. They must therefore initially have been deemed so manifestly good as to be beyond question. They could only have been so deemed if the original political people regarded those who made the laws and conventions, i.e., their ancestors, as being of the sort who could plausibly be said to make manifestly good laws and conventions; the original political people must have seen their ancestors as being in some decisive respect better than they were – perhaps even as offspring of gods. At any rate, a common or political understanding of virtue and nobility is strictly necessary for the city to come into being (and arguably to continue being), and it is the gods that ultimately make Phaedrus' political conception of virtue and nobility viable.

---

[91] Which may or may not correspond to divisions inherent in nature. His analysis may be accidentally correct.

[92] This is on display throughout the Platonic corpus, but perhaps most obviously at his capital trial for impiety, where he mentions 'the god' 23 times. See *Apology*.

Now the first speaker of *Symposium* to speak in a demonstrably impious fashion is Pausanius. He is the original unbeliever. He enunciates a principle of action that is, as I have argued, ultimately the principle of a man who believes in nothing.[93] Socrates argues in *Republic* that one is likely to end up believing in nothing if one is exposed to the skill of argument at too young an age or before one is ready for it (537d-539d). For it is a relatively easy thing to teach anyone with a modicum of intelligence to argue well enough to tear apart virtually any and all beliefs, but it is much more difficult to teach him something positive in which to believe that can withstand such reckless arguments, much less teach him to reach positive conclusions on his own. The work of destruction is child's play; the work of creation requires mature philosophical ability. Engaging recklessly in argumentative behaviour tends to leave one in a state of universal disbelief: "Then when they themselves refute many men and are refuted by many, they fall quickly into a profound disbelief of what they formerly believed" (*Republic* 539b-c). In the dialogue *Protagoras*, we find a young Pausanius keeping company with sophists (315d);[94] we can surmise that he learned from them to argue at a too young age. One who argues and questions everything will question especially the gods and the laws that support them; the bulk of Pausanius' speech is a questioning of erotic laws that exploits common opinion about the gods. One who questions the laws in this manner will eventually come to believe that "what the law says is no more noble than base" (*Republic* 538d-e). The effect of this attitude towards the laws is to engender in the one who has it a general sort of lawlessness; laws that formerly guided one's actions now become powerless. They are seen as something that is strictly man-made, and that can as easily be unmade. In particular, laws that formerly held in check the pleasures are now no longer sufficient for this purpose. The pleasures are thus emancipated. There is a close connection between impiety and the emancipation of the pleasures. Being emancipated, the pleasures tend to rule. When Pausanius introduces his principle of action he illustrates it with three examples of human action, the common denominator of which is, as I have said, that they are all associated with parties or other convivial gatherings. People have parties for fun; parties serve the purpose of pleasure. In introducing his purposeless principle of action, Pausanius actually points to his true purpose. And, of course, he is mainly interested in eros because of the pleasure with which he associates it. Pleasure is what motivates him; Pausanius is ruled by pleasure.

---

[93] See pp. 69-70 above.

[94] He is especially closely associated there with the sophist Prodicus, who was known for his concern with the very precise use of language, and especially with very precise verbal distinctions, and Pausanius' present speech certainly shows the effects of this influence.

To be sure, we are all ruled by the good, or rather what we consider to be the good (cf. 205a, 206a). For Pausanius the good is pleasure. If Phaedrus is *Symposium's* representation of original politics, then Pausanius as the first to attack him is *Symposium's* representation of the first momentous political change. For Phaedrus, the good equals the ancestral, for Pausanius the good equals pleasure. The essence of the first momentous political change is the shift from the equation of the good with the ancestral to the equation of the good with the pleasant.[95] When enough citizens come to accept the legitimacy of being ruled by pleasure, the quality of politics of course changes. This change is a devolution rather than an evolution. The laws are upheld originally by respect for the ancestral, which inculcates in the citizenry from childhood convictions about what is just and fair. But with the emancipation of the pleasures, the original ancestral basis of the laws is questioned, and citizens begin to lose their convictions:

---

[95] According to Strauss:

> It would not be surprising if the primeval equation of the good with the ancestral had been replaced, first of all, by the equation of the good with the pleasant. For when the primeval equation is rejected on the basis of the distinction between nature and convention, the things forbidden by ancestral custom or the divine law present themselves as emphatically natural and hence intrinsically good. The things forbidden by ancestral custom are forbidden because they are desired; and the fact that they are forbidden by convention shows that they are not desired on the basis of convention; they are then desired by nature. Now what induces man to deviate from the narrow path of ancestral custom or divine law appears to be the desire for pleasure and the aversion to pain. The natural good thus appears to be pleasure.

> And then there are other practices opposed to these [convictions about the just and fair], possessing pleasures that flatter our soul and draw it to them. They do not persuade men who are at all sensible [or, 'measured', and in context, 'moderate', and hence not controlled by pleasure; *metríous*]; these men rather honour the ancestral things and obey them as rulers. (*Republic*, 538d)

This questioning of the laws *is* a decline, because it does not lead to improved laws; it derogates from old laws without replacing them with viable new ones. We see this clearly in Pausanius' speech, which argues for changes to the law, none of which are viable.

Pausanius is a sophist; the first to derogate from politics is the sophist. Sophistry is the original political sickness. Sophistry originates in the emancipation of the pleasures. The emancipation of the pleasures necessitates sophistry because there is something recognizably low about many of them, whereas their emancipation requires that they be treated as equal. We share bodily pleasures in common with the animals, and they thus point to our animal heritage. And while there are indeed distinctly human pleasures, they do not provide an adequate basis for human virtue or excellence; despite there being a distinct pleasure in virtuous activity (as Aristotle argues) there seems to be a certain irreducible tension between pleasure-seeking per se and virtue (cf. *Gorgias*, 497d-505b). The basis of human nobility is virtue not pleasure, as most everyone would concede – no one *admires* the pleasure-seeker for his success. The pleasures thus have to be presented by one who is ruled by them as something other than or better than they are, or else simply hidden, if he is to maintain a noble appearance; in order to 'keep up appearances', the man ruled by pleasure must profess a concern for virtue. We see this

---

Orientation by pleasure becomes the first substitute for the orientation by the ancestral. (Strauss *Natural Right and History*108-109) necessity acted out quite clearly in the character Pausanius, who spends most of his eulogy to eros hiding a concern for pleasure behind a concern for virtue.

To return to Socrates, he was born into a regime wherein sophists were already politically influential. Sophistry antedates philosophy; sophistry corrupted the city before philosophy ever could have. This fact is reflected in *Symposium* by the fact that Pausanius' speech occurs prior to Socrates'. But the claim that the sophists are the first to derogate from politics must be understood in light of arguments made elsewhere in the Platonic corpus. Socrates argues in *Republic* that the greatest sophist of all is in fact the city itself, because the various individual sophists – while they seem to offer political wisdom – ultimately do nothing more than teach the dogma of the city (*Republic*, 492ff; cf. *Gorgias*, 465c). This is as much as to say that sophistry and politics are simply coeval. Sophistry is inherent in the city, which implies that the city contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Whatever harm Socrates may have perpetrated on the city through his treatment of the gods, it certainly could not be any greater than the harm already inherent in the day-to-day operation of politics itself.

---------- * ---------- * ----------

Pausanius next embarks on what might today be referred to as an exercise in 'comparative politics'. He surveys erotic law at home and abroad, partly in an effort to adduce this survey in support of his argument for a change in the law, and partly in an effort to demonstrate his own erudition. This survey reminds us of a number of important issues, the first of which is that one of the greatest practical problems with which every regime must deal – perhaps even the most important practical problem – is how best to manage human eros for the common good. As the tool used for erotic management is the law, his speech alerts us to the relationship between morality and eros. We wonder in particular whether erotic laws are essentially repressive, or whether they may actually support and promote eros in some way. In any event, the laws are of the essence of the city, and as erotic laws deal with several of the greatest practical problems of the city, they have a defining effect. If we wanted to differentiate and catalogue all the various actual regimes, a good basis upon which to do this would be erotic laws.

The simple lesson learned by a comparative survey such as Pausanius provides is that people in different societies differ, and that they have different laws. The psychological effect of this lesson is to heighten the importance of the laws, for it tends to leave the impression that they are all-powerful, and that change in laws can be used to effect virtually any change in people. The possibilities for 'social engineering' would thus be limitless. This impression strengthens Pausanius' argument, which is from this point forward that the change he is recommending in erotic law will make the people virtuous. Yet it is difficult to sort out cause and effect here; while it is undeniable that the laws have a profound effect on the character of the people, it is also the case that the character of the people affects the laws. His survey actually demonstrates the latter point just as well as the former. It provides examples of what can be understood as two 'extremes' (which are roughly analogous to the extremes in Aristotle's discussion of the moral virtues – e.g., courage is a mean between the extremes of cowardice and rashness). One extreme is exemplified by Elis and Boeotia, where pederasty is legal in a wholly unqualified manner. It is legal and without shame because (supposedly) the people there are not very good speakers, and this deficiency requires the absence of any proscription against pederasty in order to make it easier for them to persuade the young.[96] The other extreme is exemplified by the eastern parts of Ionia where Greeks live under barbarians, where pederasty is absolutely prohibited. It is illegal and shameful there because the tyrants in those barbarous places see it, together with philosophy and gymnastics,[97] as a threat to their rule, and so they suppress it. At one extreme, the law comes to view primarily as a reflection of the quality of the people or the ruled, at the other, as a reflection of the quality of the rulers (182b-c). Of course, in the first case, the quality of the ruled at once implies something about the quality of the rulers, whereas in the second, the quality of the rulers at once implies something about the quality of the ruled (as Pausanius makes explicit). In both cases, the law is affected by the quality of both the rulers and the ruled. This is not the point that Pausanius wished to make, but it is an implication of what he is saying, and if we think about it, we see that this must be a universal truth about law. The possibilities for 'social engineering' are thus not unlimited, but are rather decisively limited by the quality of the rulers and the ruled.

---

[96] Everybody wants to persuade the young. Wherever pederasty is not illegal, it is widely practiced. This indicates that he sees it as natural.

[97] There is a feature of the Greek here that is difficult to render in English: all three words – pederasty, philosophy, and gymnastics - are 'love' words, which could be translated as 'love of boys', 'love of wisdom', and 'love of gymnastics'. The point therefore comes across nicely in the Greek that love is a threat to tyranny, or that eros is a force for freedom. This should be compared to the treatment of eros in *Republic*, where eros is, so far from being a threat to tyranny, rather the psychic basis of tyranny, and the tyrant is eros personified.

The other two cities Pausanius mentions in his survey are the leading Greek cities of Athens and Sparta (182a-b). One gets the impression that they constitute something like the moral mean between the extremes he discusses. The extremes have simple laws, whereas the laws in Athens and Sparta are "complicated" (or, 'many-coloured', conveying a sense of 'cunningly wrought'; *poikílos*). They are complicated because they partake of each of the two extreme and "easy to understand" cases. The "easy to understand" laws correspond to the simple character of rulers and ruled in the cities where they exist. On the one hand, in Elis and Boeotia, they are not good speakers, but they are free, on the other, in Ionia and other places where they live under barbarians, they are not free (182b-d). Uninhibited pederasty, erotic freedom, goes with the freedom of the city, but it also goes with what he calls "slothfulness [or, 'idleness', 'laziness'; *argían*] of soul". Apparently, what he means is that the people in Elis and Boeotia are rustics who pursue every kind of freedom, but as we might expect, they lack 'culture', they cannot speak well, and hence they must lack philosophy. Obversely, the Ionians who are ruled by the barbarians are evidently not freedom loving people, for they " lack manliness" (*anandría*, and so they succumb to barbarian tyranny), but they are intelligent and can speak well, and hence philosophy is native to them (which, as he notes, the barbarian tyrants suppress in order to secure their rule). The leading Greek cities combine the best of both extremes: they are free and manly, but they are also intelligent and well-spoken, and hence they have philosophy.

The message is clear: the erotic laws of Athens and Sparta that contribute to this happy state of affairs must be good laws. It was predictable that the laws of Athens and Sparta should receive such a favourable presentation from Pausanius, given the conventional quality of his argument. As there is no authority for him above the city, he has to say that the greatest laws are to be found in the greatest cities. The greatness of Athens and Sparta is commonly acknowledged, therefore they must have the greatest laws.

But whereas he is driven to acknowledge Sparta by the logic of his argument, the Spartan case actually constitutes something of an embarrassment for him. The Spartans are very different from the Athenians, who are known to be well spoken;[98] the Spartans are *not* known to be "wise in speaking". This would seem to make Sparta more like Elis and Boeotia than Athens. The Spartans are in fact characterized by a certain hostility towards 'wise men' (*Greater Hippias*, 283b-284c). The virtue for which the Spartans are most notable is in fact courage, and this is a virtue for which Pausanius is hardly notable.[99] To dwell on the Spartan case is to present himself poorly. Moreover, it would complicate his argument greatly in ways that do not support his purpose. The martially excellent Spartans worshipped an armed Aphrodite. Since his argument proceeds, as I have observed, on the basis of "what we all know" about the gods, to dwell on the Spartans would remind his listeners that "we all know" there is this *third* Aphrodite, which would require a third Eros (as he argued there is no Aphrodite without Eros, 180d). Since he derives the quality of the erotes from the quality of the Aphrodites to which they correspond, this third would be a martial eros. He would thus end up with a tripartite analysis of eros: the high soul regarding eros and the low body regarding eros that he has been trying to explicate, and another eros which regards that to which the martial pertains. This would reveal the inadequacy of the simple body/soul dichotomy to which he implicitly has been appealing all along. And if he pursued the analysis, it would begin to look much like a version of the tripartite analysis of the soul presented in Plato's *Republic*, wherein the soul is divided into a rational part, a spirited part, and an appetitive part (*Republic*, 436a-441c). It is interesting to read the psychology of *Republic* with this in mind, and to wonder whether each of the three parts of the soul can be characterized as having their own distinct or defining 'loves'.[100] However that may be, this sort of analysis hardly supports his cause, as he is not himself a 'spirited' man. For these reasons, he mentions Sparta once, and then lets it drop.

---

[98] Athens is famous for 'wisdom', and hence for the 'well-spoken' people to be found there (cf. *Protagoras* 337d).

[99] We see a variety of evidence to support this conclusion, not the least important of which is that, although he professes such great concern for virtue, he never once mentions the virtue of courage. This is another interesting respect in which his speech differs from that of Phaedrus, which was of course dominated by courage.

These reflections help us to understand an aspect of his speech that would otherwise be very difficult to explain. Pausanius is obviously very much in favour of pederasty. It is thus initially something of a mystery as to why he does not simply endorse a regime of erotic freedom, such as is found in Elis and Boeotia. The reason lies in his timid character. He does not just wish to be free to practice pederasty; he wants the law to sanction his pederastic practices. And if he can formulate the law in a certain way, a way that is tailored to suit his specific needs, then his chances of 'erotic success' are greatly increased. He cannot be unambiguously pro-freedom in erotic matters because he would not 'do well' in a regime of erotic freedom. To see this, one need only try to imagine how Pausanius would fair in Elis and Boeotia, where they are, as he says, "incapable of speaking" (182b). The people there would be thoroughly unimpressed with his sophisticated speech. In those places he would have to rely on other personal attributes to attract and capture a beloved, attributes which he lacks. Total erotic freedom would be an unmitigated disaster for Pausanius because he would find no erotic satisfaction in such a regime. So he seeks the support of laws.[101] These may impede his freedom, and might reduce his pleasure in certain ways, but he thinks he gains through them access to a greater pleasure. His interest in erotic laws is based on a hedonistic calculus. He would effect an overall reconstruction of erotic laws designed to serve the natural good of pleasure, and especially his own. He needs the law on his side to cultivate amongst the citizenry and especially amongst potential beloveds a conventional understanding of erotic matters that casts him in a favourable light. His eulogy to Eros can be seen as one long sustained effort to alter the laws to his advantage.

---

[100] Cf. Craig, 92 and 94.

[101] He has learned from the sophists that he has associated with since his youth that this is indeed a great support, one that has great potential in turning youth towards him who are not naturally so inclined. In the words of Protagoras:

> And then, when they are released from schooling, the city compels them to learn the laws, and to live their lives according to the model set in the laws, *so that they may not follow the random dictates of* [personal] *inclination* ... (my italics, *Protagoras*, 326c-d)

This point becomes clearer as he proceeds. The laws in Athens and in Sparta are, to reiterate, complicated (182a). He ignores the Spartan case, partly for the reasons I have indicated above, and partly because his concern really lies with his native Athenian laws, and in the end turns his attention wholly towards them. Because these laws are complicated, they are not easy to understand. The laws do not speak clearly, and so their intention requires interpretation and explanation from one who has expertise in them. Pausanius presents himself as providing this service; his eulogy appears to become in the end an extended explanation of the erotic laws of present-day Athens (which occupies roughly three fifths of his eulogy, 182d-185c). But he is not trying to explain the laws out of 'public spiritedness'. Rather, the opportunity that Pausanius creates for himself to explain the laws is an opportunity in effect to create laws, or to harness the power of the laws, for his own benefit. For if the meaning of the laws cannot be readily understood, then their practical meaning will be rendered by whoever explains or makes them understandable, or at any rate, by whoever provides the simple statement of what they actually command. The practical effect of complex laws is to accord political power to legal experts. This is why Pausanius presents himself as one. If his explanation of Athenian law is convincing, so convincing that most people begin to understand the law as he explains it, then he in effect changes the law in the direction of his own understanding of it. As his understanding of it finally serves no higher purpose than what pleases him, this is really an exercise in 'legal tyranny'.

Pausanius begins his explanation of present-day erotic law in Athens with the following assertion about it: "But here [in Athens] there are much finer customs [conventions, traditions, ways of doing things] than elsewhere;[102] yet just as I said, they are not easy to understand" (182d). The law seems both to condone and condemn pederasty, which is what makes it hard to understand. Pausanius identifies four common customs that would lead an observer to conclude that the Athenians consider pederasty lawful and noble (182d-c), and three that would lead to the opposite conclusion (183c-d). A general survey of these two groups of customs shows that the 'pro-pederasty' customs all pertain to the lover, whereas the 'anti-pederasty' customs all pertain to the beloved. Pederasty is controversial, and now the reason why becomes apparent: it is commonly understood to be good for the lover and bad for the beloved. Pausanius' explanation of the law on this controversial matter consists in simply identifying the 'pro-pederasty' customs, and then explaining how the apparently 'anti-pederasty' ones actually turn out to be 'pro-pederasty' after all. If he can convince citizens that the law as a whole is best understood as 'pro-pederasty', then it in fact becomes so.

---

[102] The transliteration of this important clause is: *entháde dè polù toútōn kállion nenomothétētai*. A more literal translation would be: 'The people of this country have framed laws for themselves nobler than from there [i.e., the other, lesser, places he has discussed – Elis, Boeotia, and barbarous parts of Ionia]'. The way that he says this conveys a sense of a connection between the way that people are or act and the formal laws enacted by the assembly. The key word is *nenomothétētai*, which is etymologically close to *nomos*, and which used in respect of a people means laws they have furnished for themselves. The type of laws they furnish for themselves obviously has some connection to the type of people they are, or the way they act (and hence their customs, conventions, traditions, ways of doing things, etc.). This connection is important because his principle of action provides him with his standard for assessing people's way

To begin with the 'pro-pederasty' customs, "it is said to be a finer [*kállion*] thing to love openly than in secret; and in particular to love the noblest [or, 'most well-born'; *gennaiotatön*] and the best, even if they are uglier than others" (182d). This first observation reminds us of the public quality of eros found in Phaedrus' account. Phaedrus' account of eros necessarily had a public quality because, as I argued, he has no private experience of it. Love was for him a public phenomenon, and here Pausanius says that the finer love is public. Pausanius' account of eros acquires a public quality, but not because he has no private experience of it; it acquires a public quality because of his hidden agenda. He seeks to pursue his own erotic private good by altering the erotic laws, which are essentially public. He is thus driven to endow eros with a public quality. But if eros is indeed an essentially private phenomenon, then the laws, which are an essentially public phenomenon, must be clumsy regulators of it; they can really only regulate eros at all to the extent that they can regulate whatever external appearance or public aspect that it might have. Whatever the public eye cannot see, it cannot designate

---

of acting as noble or base, and he needs to be able to carry this standard forward into his discussion of the laws governing people's actions. To rephrase, if his principle of action is to be relevant to his discussion of the laws, he needs to establish a connection between it and the laws. The connection is that the laws are a reflection (either as a cause or an effect – he either is unaware of this issue, or prefers to leave it ambiguous, for he never does resolve or even explicitly address it) of the way that people act, and the way that people act can be evaluated in terms of his principle of action.

as noble or otherwise. This means that, to the extent that we live private lives, we can enjoy that much freedom in *virtually any* regime.

The second 'pro-pederasty' custom Pausanius identifies is that everyone encourages the lover, "and not as if he were doing anything shameful" (or 'base'; *aischrón*, 182d). Third, "that if a lover makes a successful capture, it is thought to be fine [*kalón*], and if he fails, shameful [*aischrón*]" (182e). We see here clearly the inadequacy of his principle of action, which was meant to provide the means of evaluating the noble and base in a strictly non-purposeful or non-teleological manner, and which held that the quality of the action inhered entirely in "how it was done in the doing of it": when he speaks of actual erotic practice, this principle is apparently inoperative, for the action turns out to be noble or base entirely as it succeeds or fails, i.e., in actual practice, the action is evaluated *entirely* in terms of its purpose. The implication of what he says here is that *any* means towards the capture of a beloved are noble as long as they are successful; only a failed attempt at the capture of a beloved is thought to be shameful. It thus comes as less of a surprise that with the fourth 'pro-pederasty' custom Pausanius identifies, he abandons completely his principle of action: "[F]or making an attempt at seizure [of a beloved], the law grants the lover the opportunity to be praised for doing amazing [or, 'wondrous'; *thaumastà*[103]] deeds" (182e). By "amazing", he means shameful deeds like "making all sorts of supplications and beseechings in their [i.e., the lovers'] requests, swearing oaths, sleeping at the doors of their beloveds, and being willing to perform acts of slavishness that not one slave would" (183a). There is no possible way to interpret any of the things Pausanius mentions here as being done in 'good taste', although they can indeed be efficacious towards the capture of a beloved. Pausanius starts out by making the evaluation of action a matter of 'how' (his principle of action pertains to the manner, style, or grace of an action), but ends up by making it a matter of 'purpose'. It is important to see that there is a certain necessity to this turn of events. He develops his principle of action in the first place because it makes him look good; it makes erotic action a matter of manners, and he has the 'right' manners. But manners point to virtue; high-class manners are the manners of the high class, and in the end the only convincing rationale for a high class is superior virtue. His principle of action actually relies on the idea of virtue for whatever appeal it has. Sensing this, Pausanius is driven to make the appeal to virtue explicit, which he does by associating erotic action with virtue supported by law.[104] Pederasty properly practiced is the erotic action that leads to virtue, and the moral imperative then becomes to promote it. Erotic law does this; it supports virtue by encouraging the formation of proper pederastic relationships. In practical terms, this means that the law promotes the lover's pursuit and capture of a beloved. But if the law sanctions the capture of the beloved, then logically it must sanction the means that are instrumental to that purpose. The greater the purpose of the law is deemed to be, the greater the variety of 'questionable' means to that purpose which it will countenance. The greatest purpose of all is said to be the development of virtue. The general thrust of Pausanius' argument concerning the Athenian law about lovers is that the Athenians must view the purpose of the lovers as leading to virtue, and hence an exceedingly fine thing, for it is their way to accept all sorts of "amazing" behaviour from them as they pursue that purpose, behaviour that they would most definitely not accept were it for any other purpose (182e-b). Apparently, the only practical concern of the law is whether or not this behaviour works; erotic success thus replaces Pausanius' principle of action as the standard for the evaluation of erotic action. If his purposeless principle of action fails here at the place where he most needs and intends it to succeed, with respect to human eros, then it is simply not a viable principle of human action.

---

[103] This is the word Aristotle uses in his *Metaphysics* when he associates the origin of philosophy with a sense of wonder: "For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize; they wondered originally at the obvious difficulties, then advanced little by little and stated difficulties about the greater matters" (982b12-15).

It is to be noted that the fourth pro-pederasty custom – the acceptance of "amazing", i.e., shameful and slavish, deeds done by a lover in pursuit of a beloved – is the central custom out of a total of seven mentioned by Pausanius, and that a fairly lengthy discussion of it occurs at the exact centre of his speech (182e-b). The issue is of central importance. Pausanius is mainly right in his discussion of it: we do indeed generally give people in love a lot of latitude to act in strange and otherwise unacceptable ways, because, after all, they are in love. People in love are excused because they are 'not themselves'; they are excused because they are ruled by something beyond themselves. In making excuses for people in love, we recognize the ruling power of love. But we also recognize that there is something good or noble – or, at least, 'charming' – about being ruled in this way. As Pausanius rightfully points out, no such allowances are made for people who are ruled by other things, like a desire for money or political power (183a). These two counter examples refer to the two basic goods that the city distributes: wealth and honour. There is a kind of an irony here in that the *nomos* of the city blames people who would stoop to slavishness to attain its own goods, but praises people who would do the same for a good that it cannot presume to distribute. The implication is that the city recognizes that eros is somehow higher than wealth and honour, or that the natural good is higher than the conventional goods. Pausanius' argument points to the superiority of nature.

---

[104] The first mentions of the words virtue, law, and end (*telos*) occur in the same sentence, 181e.

The 'un-free' are slaves. Slaves are shameful because they are 'un-free', and this is why it is shameful to act as they do. Even slaves recognize the shamefulness of slavish behaviour, for as Pausanius says, the lover is willing to perform acts of slavishness for his beloved "that not one slave would" (183a). What accounts for that? Why would a slave balk at doing slavish deeds? The answer comes back again to the distinction between nature and convention. The slaves to whom Pausanius refers are the actual slaves of the city, i.e., conventional slaves. All of them would balk at the slavish deeds he mentions if they were commanded to do them by a conventional master. This is because they are not that slavish by nature. There is a difference between natural and conventional slaves, and there is no guarantee that all those who are slaves by convention are slaves by nature (cf. Aristotle *Politics* 1254a17-1255b15). But then neither is there any guarantee that all those who are free by convention are free by nature. This of course indicates a serious limitation on the political efficacy of democracy. The ideal political situation would be one where those who are free by convention are free by nature. It is easy enough to understand who are free by convention, for the law simply declares it, but it is, as I have said, difficult to understand who are free by nature.[105]

Pausanius is ruled by bodily pleasure, and he wants nothing to stand in the way of it. The issue of the acceptance of slavish deeds done by a lover in pursuit of a beloved is of central importance *to him* because it excuses any and all sorts of shameful behaviour on the part of the lover; the practical effect of this custom is to give lovers more or less total freedom in pursuit of a beloved. Perhaps feeling giddy at this prospect, he loses his sense of balance (for he has been balancing the requirements of an apparent concern for virtue with an actual concern for pleasure all along), and lets slip: "[W]hat is perhaps the most dreadful, as the many say, is that, if he [the lover] swears and then departs from his oath, for him alone is there a pardon from the gods – for they deny that an oath in sex is an oath" (183b). He ostensibly has been justifying a noble pederasty that loves soul rather than body. But he cannot quite manage to hide the fact that what he is really interested in is precisely sex and body. If there was any lingering doubt as to the sophistical quality of his speech, it is now removed.

---

[105] Yet Pausanius' argument properly considered suggests a theoretical outline of how to understand this. The law excuses slavish deeds done by a lover in pursuit of a beloved, but it does not excuse slavish deeds done by anyone for the sake of money and honour – conventional goods. The difference is explained with reference to the goodness and nobility of 'that for the sake of which' the deeds are done. The city condemns anyone who would act slavishly for the sake of the goods that it distributes, but condones the same behaviour for the sake of a simply natural good; the city implicitly recognizes a good beyond its own. Anyone who would perform slavish deeds for the sake of conventional goods probably really does have the soul of a slave, but it is not clear that the same can be said of one who would do them for the sake of a beloved: to be ruled by desire for money and honour is reproachable, but to be ruled by eros for something beyond the city is not (183b). It is certainly pertinent to recall in this connection that the word 'philosophy' (*philos sophia*) literally means 'love of wisdom'. In *Republic*, Socrates presents the philosopher as the furthest removed from the tyrant (e.g., *Republic*, 587a-588a), who is the most slave-like of all men (*Republic*, 577d, 579a-e). The philosopher thus comes to view as the freest of all men. Yet even he is not *simply* free; the philosopher too must be in some sense a slave, for according to Socrates' express claim, the only possible way to attain intelligence or 'mind' (*nous*) is by slaving for it (*Republic*, 494d). Complete freedom is not a possibility (cf. *Republic*, 564a). The implication is that freedom consists not so much in the absence of a master as in the presence of the right kind of master (cf. *Republic*, 590a-591b).

Pausanius next turns his attention to the three common customs which would lead an observer to conclude that Athenians are 'anti-pederasty': fathers set attendants in charge of their sons who keep them from talking to lovers, the beloved's comrades blame him if they see anything like this going on, and elders do nothing to impede this blame (183c-d). To make his case that the Athenian law as a whole is best understood as 'pro-pederasty', he now tries to explain exactly how it is that these customs actually encourage, and are intended to encourage, the proper practice of pederasty. The apparently 'anti-pederasty' customs govern, as I have said, the actions of beloveds. The law wants the beloved to act nobly. This observation calls to mind his principle of action, the point of which was to evaluate actions in terms of 'style' and 'good taste'; he reminds his listeners of his principle, and applies it to the actions of beloveds (183d). But in applying his principle to beloveds, he alters its sense. The quality of action now becomes defined in terms of the one to whom it is directed: it is base to gratify one who is wretched, whereas it is noble to gratify one who is valuable. The valuable lover turns out to be the constant lover,[106] the one who is in love with that which is lasting: the soul rather than the body (183d-a). Simple constancy of love throughout life becomes the defining characteristic of the noble love, i.e., the Uranian. The apparently 'anti-pederasty' customs are really intended to serve as a kind of 'testing' device, whereby the Uranian lover is distinguished from the pandemian. The test works as follows. The 'anti-pederasty' customs all encourage the beloveds to keep away from lovers. And they call any beloved who is caught too quickly "shameful" (184a). Their practical effect is to increase the amount of time and effort it takes to capture a beloved. This promotes the noble practice of pederasty because persistence over time reveals lovers to be what type they are. The lover that pursues for a long time, even a beloved who is putting him off, *proves* himself to be a noble lover, he proves himself to be in love with the beloved's soul. Thus the apparently 'anti-pederasty' customs actually prove to be 'pro-pederasty' customs after all. But obviously this interpretation of the law really serves the selfish interests of the lover, for it discourages any sort of present evaluation of the lover, which again has the practical effect of giving him a freer reign in his erotic conduct. If the criterion for distinguishing the noble love is simply the passage of time, then it will take a long time to evaluate the lover; if the lover can only be evaluated 'in time', then he has nothing to prove today.

---

[106] As evidently Pausanius has been with Agathon. We know this because he is shown in the dialogue *Protagoras* as the lover of Agathon, whom Socrates described as being at the time "a young lad" (*Protagoras*, 315d). Pausanius' speech is of course given in the presence of his beloved, which fact colours its quality.

It thus becomes easy for him to make extravagant and empty promises of good. What Pausanius promises is nothing less than an education in virtue. The lover's slavish behaviour in pursuit of a beloved he now presents as dedication to the beloved for the sake of providing this education. This is both noble and according to the law. Pausanius explains that there is another noble and lawful slavery corresponding to this on the part of the beloved, the slavery to virtue:

> [I]t is customarily held by us that if anyone is willing to devote his care to someone in the belief that he will be better because of him, either in regard to some kind of wisdom or any other part of virtue whatsoever, this willing enslavement is not disgraceful, nor is it flattery. (184c)

The enslavement of the lover involves his dedication to the virtue of the beloved. In *exchange* for this, the lover receives the devotion and willing enslavement of the beloved, who wants to develop virtue. The erotic relationship as Pausanius describes it really amounts to a simple deal:

> [T]he one, in serving a beloved who has granted his favours, would justly serve in anything; and the other, in assisting him who is making him wise and good, would justly assist. (184d)

The deal here is 'favours' for 'wisdom'. This particular kind of deal is usually called prostitution. It is, to be sure, an unusual form of prostitution, inasmuch as usually cash is exchanged for favours. If the payment in wisdom were actually forthcoming, it might even be a 'high', and in the end worthwhile form of prostitution, but it is prostitution nevertheless. And from the man's point of view, it is a terribly clever thing, for unlike the common form of prostitution, where the exchange of cash for favours leaves the man poorer, with this prostitution for an education, the man can pay over and over again in the coin of wisdom, without ever becoming any poorer. This is of course a base thought, but it has the virtue of forcing us to think about the nature of our own erotic activity.[107]

If love were this sort of an exchange, it would certainly be a very risky one for the beloved. For by Pausanius' account, the whole reason why he enters into it in the first place is that he lacks wisdom, but lacking it, how can he possibly evaluate whether his lover can, will, or is delivering an education in it? It takes wisdom to recognize wisdom, and the beloved is *per hypothesis* unwise. The beloved therefore must enter into the deal on nothing more than a hope and a prayer. Obviously, this puts the lover in a very advantageous position vis à vis the beloved. Virtue develops in time and with practice, but favours are of the moment. Pausanius arranges things such that he is able to exchange a present good for the mere promise of a future one.

---

[107] Cf Bloom *Love and Friendship* 466.

Owing to the position in which the beloved finds himself in the erotic relationship, he really has no *reason* to expect any good to come of it. He must therefore have a fear that things will turn out badly, that the lover's promises will prove, in time, to have been in vain. This fear of course runs counter to Pausanius' purpose. The last thing that Pausanius does to secure his erotic position is to allay this fear. The fear as Pausanius evidently diagnoses it is grounded in a sense of shame, the shame that comes with being duped and had. The way that Pausanius allays the fear is by arguing that there is *never* anything to be ashamed of:

> Even to be deceived in this regard is no disgrace... were someone to grant his favours because he thought that his lover was good and that he himself would be better through his friendship with his lover, then even if his lover is found to be bad and without virtue, the deception is noble all the same. For he too is thought to have made plain what holds in his own case – that strictly for the sake of virtue and becoming better he would show his total zeal in everything, and this is the noblest thing of all. (184e-b)

If a beloved can say that his intentions were good, he will appear to be noble rather than shameful. There is thus nothing for the beloved to worry about. The practical effect of this is to make it easier for the lover to capture and maintain a beloved.

The sophistical quality of Pausanius' speech becomes ever more apparent as it proceeds. When we see through the sophistry to the true motives of the man who creates it, he appears quite base. Yet it is a mistake to dismiss his arguments simply as self-serving hypocrisy, for the problem with which he struggles is one by which we are all, as erotic beings, affected. His basic point about there being a noble and a base eros reflects a reality that I suspect most of us recognize in our own erotic experience. As thinking beings, we are all driven to try to justify our own erotic practices or our own erotic character. Nevertheless, very few of us do. This fact bespeaks both a denigration of reason and an unwillingness to apply it to our own psyches. People can be 'reasonable' about all sorts of issues, but there is generally a certain reticence when it comes to being reasonable about issues that are 'too close to home', or that have a self-defining character, such as does the issue of our own erotic natures. In attempting to provide an account of himself, and to justify his erotic practices, Pausanius is already superior to most people. His justification is sophistical, but it is important to see how likely it is that anyone who was less than perfect would also be drawn into sophistry were they to make the same attempt.

This cannot, however, be taken as an argument against the attempt, for the effort is elevating. This is true for two reasons: it leads to self-knowledge and to virtue. In justifying his own erotic practices, Pausanius is forced to think about them. This must be, in at least some minimal sense, an exercise in self-knowledge. And in justifying them in terms of virtue, he has to give some thought to how he stands to virtue. The term 'virtue' was for the Greeks not a moral concept (it is interesting to note in this connection that the Greeks did not even have a word for the English 'moral'), but rather simply meant the specific excellence of a thing. For example, the virtue of a knife is to cut. Human virtue is then the specific excellence of the human animal. What, substantively, this amounts to is of course a matter for debate. But whatever it is, there is a connection between virtue and speech about virtue. To speak about virtue forces the speaker to think about virtue, about what substantially it is, and this tends to improve one's actions. But perhaps more importantly, to profess a care for virtue commits one to it. Pausanius' arguments are sophistical, but he nonetheless has to at least try to appear to be the proper pederast, the virtuous man, that he praises. To try to appear to be virtuous has the effect of making us more so in fact, for the only way to appear virtuous is through our actions, as it is what we do, above all else, that makes us what we are. In sum, speech about virtue inculcates in both the speaker and the listener an awareness of the gap between how we are and how we ought to be, and this promotes virtue.

6 Eryximachus

> *Human knowledge and human power meet in one; for where the cause is*
> *not known, the effect cannot be produced. Nature to be commanded must*
> *be obeyed; and that which in contemplation is as the cause is in*
> *operation as the rule.*
> *(Francis Bacon* New Organon *Book I, aph. iii)*

Our narrator, Apollodorus, tells us that Aristophanes was unable to speak because he was seized by an uncontrollable bout of hiccoughs. Consequently, the next in order to speak, Eryximachus, spoke in his stead. The hiccoughs are prominent in the overall drama of the dialogue, and they have an important effect on the order of the erotic speeches. Because of this, one wonders about the extent to which eros is like the hiccoughs: an involuntary physical response to some stimulus.[108] If eros is indeed like that, then it can, in principle, be understood with an art (*techne*). Physical or material relationships are generally governed by principles which can be rationally intellected, and which form the basis of the kind of knowledge that is characteristic of art (*techne*). This knowledge is certain or true inasmuch as the principles upon which it is based are logically necessary. The one who has this 'expert' knowledge, the artisan, could thus potentially purposefully manipulate or even wholly control the physical phenomena that the relevant principles govern. It is the business of the practitioner of the art of medicine to try to know the principles which govern the physical phenomena of hiccoughs and other motions of the body; if eros is like the hiccoughs, then it is amenable to management by the art of medicine, and to the extent that human beings are erotic beings, they would be subject to rule by the doctor. As I have noted, it was the Doctor Eryximachus who established the rule of *Symposium*; whether he is in fact qualified to rule turns decisively on the extent to which eros is actually governed by the principles he has learned through his art.

Apollodorus' exact words are:

> With Pausanius' pausation [Pausaníou dè pausaménou] – the wise teach me to talk in such balanced phrases – Aristodemus said that it was Aristophanes' turn to speak;

---

[108] And here one must be careful not to impose more homogeneity on the subject matter than it admits of: male eros may differ substantially from female eros on this point.

> however, he had just got the hiccoughs (from satiety or something else) and was unable to speak. (185c)

The word translated here as 'pausation' (*paúö*) has a general meaning of 'make to end'. The word-play between it and Pausanius' name has the effect of drawing our attention to the relatively high frequency of the word in the immediately ensuing discussion of Aristophanes' hiccoughs. Aristophanes says: "Eryximachus, it is only just that you either stop (*paûsai*) my hiccoughs, or speak on my behalf until I do stop (*paúsömai*)." Eryximachus responds:

> Well, I shall do both. I shall talk in your turn, and you, when you stop [*pausë*] hiccoughing, in mine. And while I am speaking, see if by holding your breath for a long time, you make the hiccoughs stop [*paúesthai*]; but if they do not, gargle with water. And if they prove very severe, take something with which you might irritate your nose, and sneeze; and if you do this once or twice, even if the hiccoughs are severe, they will stop [*paúsetai*]. (185d-e)

It is interesting to reflect on the way that the word is used here. In the first usage, the hiccoughs are stopped through the intervention of Eryximachus. In the second, the hiccoughs stop on their own, much as rain stops when there is no more water. The stopping in this usage of the word conveys no sense of completion; the action does not cease because it has reached some natural end or *telos*. In Aristophanes' two usages of the word, the 'causes' of the stopping are *techne* and chance. The sense of the third usage, which is the first by the doctor Eryximachus, makes this distinction a moot point: Aristophanes is to speak when the hiccoughs stop, for whatever reason. In the fourth and fifth usages, the end of the hiccoughs is to occur as a result of Eryximachus' prescribed physical remedies. Because he is a doctor, we expect these remedies to be based on his *techne*. But they sound more like 'knacks' he has 'picked up' than something he may have learned at medical school. To say this more precisely, they are actually more like remedies that are based on mere experience rather than on rational principles that are logically necessary, or more like remedies that are based on folk medicine rather than on *techne*. The question here is the extent to which eros is like the hiccoughs; these usages need to be considered in the context of erotic activity generally. Is it 'stopped' by *techne*, chance, experience, or in some other way? This question raises two related points. If erotic activity is 'stopped' in these ways, then one wonders whether it can be 'started' in these ways. Whatever stops and starts erotic activity somehow governs it; the deeper question here is what governs eros. Moreover, there is – *especially* in erotic activity – a world of difference between stopping and finishing. To finish an action is to bring it to its conclusion or completion. If eros has a natural end or completion, a *telos*, then it is in some sense governed by its *telos*.

The issue of whether Eryximahcus' prescribed remedies for Aristophanes' hiccoughs are based on folk medicine or *techne* raises a profound political problem. For most people, the issue is of little consequence: as long as the remedies work, it makes little difference upon what they are based. The ability to cause effects is generally seen as proof-positive of knowledge. This is why most people in fact consider technical knowledge as the very paradigm of genuine knowledge: technical knowledge is *useful* – one can *do* things with it – which is interpreted as confirmation of its validity. But as the case of folk medicine actually shows, the simple ability to cause effects does not imply knowledge, however useful it may be.[109] The witch doctor may be able to cure all sorts of diseases, but this does not prove he actually *knows* why his cures work. Yet it is essential to the charm of the idea of rule by the arts – an always-powerful political charm – that it is rule governed by knowledge. If the 'artisan' in fact turns out to be characterized merely by the possession of some clever 'knacks' which people find useful, then his rule is not necessarily any different than the rule of 'politicians', who have

---

[109] Simply to know how to work effects, how to "apply certain sorts of things to people's bodies so as to induce warmth or coolness," or how to "make them vomit or make their bowels move, and a great many other such things," does not in itself make one a competent physician. One must also, and more importantly, know "to whom one should do these things and when, and to what extent." Anyone who thought he was a doctor on the basis of the first sort of knowledge and apart from this latter knowledge would be mad, as one who "after reading something in a book or chancing upon some medications supposes himself to have become a physician, when he knows nothing of the art" (*Phaedrus*, 268a-c, cf. 186c-e). There are times when applying certain things to people's bodies to induce warmth may be beneficial, but there are times when it may not, and indeed there are even times when it may be lethal. To know to whom various remedies and medications should be administered and when requires comprehensive judgment, and is based upon the kind of knowledge that is really characteristic of the doctor: knowledge of what is good for each body, or what is healthy. But to know whether or not any given remedy is actually healthy for a particular person, one must understand the nature of that person's body, which in turn requires a general understanding of the nature of body, which in turn requires a general understanding of nature (*Phaedrus*, 270b-d). This general understanding of nature is crucial to the doctor's claim to know by art rather than by mere experience.

'knacks' of their own, and who can also cause effects. Eryximachus does indeed claim real knowledge for himself on the basis of his art (e.g., 176c-d), and his rule of *Symposium* is explicitly based on his status as artisan (176c-a).[110] But he never actually *demonstrates* that his ruling is based on genuine knowledge gained through his art. This fact points to a complication in our assessment of the artisan's qualification to rule, or more generally to influence politics, for we now see that the question of this artisan's qualification to rule turns not only on the extent to which eros is actually governed by the principles which can be learned through his art, but also on the extent to which he really acts on the basis of the knowledge derived from his art. This latter is difficult to assess because, lacking the specialized knowledge of the various arts, it is difficult to assess knowledge claims of the various artisans.

The knowledge of the doctor qua artisan and the manner in which Eryximachus bases his rule on this knowledge calls to mind Socrates' treatment of the issue of artisans and their knowledge in Plato's *Apology of Socrates* (22c-e). As regards their knowledge, he accepts it as genuine, and states unequivocally that the artisans were wiser than he was in respect of it. But because they had this knowledge, and thus performed their art nobly, the artisans had a tendency to overreach: confident in the surety and value of the knowledge gained through their art, they supposed themselves to be therefore wise also in other matters, "greater matters", which in fact their art gave them no special competence with which to deal. Doctor Eryximachus displays marvellously this tendency of the artisan to overreach. Socrates concludes that it was better for him to remain as he was, rather than to be in any way, "wise in their wisdom or ignorant in their ignorance". This is because technical knowledge is only gained at the expense of knowledge of the whole. The artisan's toil in his art and the expert knowledge that is gained by it, so far from qualifying one to speak of "greater matters", actually impedes his ability to do so. The artisan focuses on only a part of reality, that part to which his art pertains. It is precisely because of this partial focus that the artisan is able to acquire expert or 'specialized' knowledge. But in doing so, the artisan is necessarily turned away from the whole, which is greater than the part to which his art pertains. The basic thrust of both Socrates' and Aristophanes' eulogies to eros, albeit in substantially different ways, is that eros arises out of a lack or neediness, i.e., eros arises out of incompleteness, and is the striving to be whole which attends the awareness or divination of this incompleteness. If this were correct, then to be most fully erotic would be the awareness or divination of the greatest whole, and the consequent striving for it. It would follow that whatever turns one away from the greatest whole necessarily limits one's erotic possibilities. Hence, owing to the fact of his 'specialization', the artisan could not be fully erotic.

---

[110] Cf. pp. 36-37 above.

Socrates' discussion of the artisans and their knowledge arises in *Apology* in the context of his assertion that he has spent his life in service to "the god", by trying to disprove a Delphic pronouncement that "no one" was wiser than he. In executing this service to the god, he constantly and continually questioned men in order to test if they were indeed wiser than he, hoping in this way to disprove the oracle. The artisans are the last of three groups of men Socrates says he questioned in this effort (*Apology*, 21a-22c). The first two were the politicians and the poets who, Socrates says, unlike the artisans, "know nothing of what they speak". The apparent implication is that the artisans are superior in respect of their wisdom. And yet, if the practice of an art has the stunting or perverting effect that I have just described, then perhaps the false knowledge of the politicians and poets is actually preferable to the true knowledge of the artisans, for the politicians and poets are at least directed towards the whole, however inadequately. It seems that *Symposium* invites the consideration of this issue, for the comparison of these three is facilitated by the fact that they end up side by side: the speech of the artisan ends up in between the speeches of a pseudo legislator and a comic poet, and the order of the speeches here would have been the same as in *Apology* (politician, poet, artisan), were it not for Aristophanes' hiccoughs. The politician and the poet seem to be better suited to living well, because their activity engages them in life as it is actually lived, *i.e.*, in the whole of life. And since it is Doctor Eryximachus who established the rule of *Symposium*, one wonders which of the three is most and least well suited to rule. Effective political rule necessarily pertains to the whole, the whole of the city, and the artisan as specialist is shut out from knowledge of this whole because his art turns him away from it, though Eryximachus wants to claim that it *is* a knowledge of the whole cosmos.

It is because of Aristophanes' hiccoughs that the artisan ends up speaking in between a pseudo legislator and a comic poet. According to the rule established by Doctor Eryximachus, the order of the eulogies to eros is given by the seating arrangement: it starts at the head couch, and moves around to the right, until all have spoken (177d). This is the law (*nomos*) of *Symposium*. By this law, Aristophanes should have spoken after Pausanius. But, owing to an ostensibly spontaneous natural phenomenon – Aristophanes' hiccoughs – the law is subverted. Technical knowledge pertains largely to the manipulation of natural phenomena, so one might suppose that the artisan would be especially competent to tackle this problem. But, whether we see Doctor Eryximachus' remedies as 'knacks' or as by art, it is important to see that they do nothing to preserve his law. Whatever knowledge he may have in respect of his art, it is in the event practically irrelevant to his political rule: the actual speaking order is in violation of the order he and the others established by law.

Significant challenges to political rule are far more likely to be driven by purposeful acts of will than by spontaneous natural phenomena. One may suspect Aristophanes' hiccoughs to be a purposeful act of will and not a spontaneous natural phenomenon. It is entirely possible that his hiccoughs are in fact feigned, a mere 'act'. He is, after all, an accomplished dramatic poet, one who is used to staging events, and adept at manipulating appearances. More precisely, he is an accomplished comic poet, and as such good at getting laughs. Aristophanean comedy in particular relies quite heavily on bodily humour; flatulence, eructations, sneezes, indigestion, bowels, and all the graceless sounds and motions of the human body figure largely, especially those having to do with sex. These sorts of things remind us of our embodied existence, and so serve as a kind of bulwark against the pretensions of 'pure' or 'disembodied' intellect. Often times, they can defeat the intentions of serious speeches, especially if those speeches are dry or unengaging. The two driest speeches of *Symposium* are given by Pausanius and Eryximachus, between whom is seated Aristophanes. He is thus very well situated to victimize them both with his bodily humour. His hiccoughs begin during Pausanius' speech (he gets them before his turn to speak arrives, 185c), and we have to visualize the effect they would have on Pausanius' speech. Hiccoughs create a funny noise, and cause the body to convulse in funny ways. We can imagine that while everyone is looking at Pausanius trying to deliver with great earnestness a speech about the virtues of Uranian love, they could not help but notice the funny sounds and convulsions of Aristophanes, sitting right next to him. The juxtaposition between the former's speech and the latter's actions serve to make the latter all the more funny, which has the effect of making the former feel awkward and appear ridiculous. What is true of Pausanius is all the more so of Eryximachus, inasmuch as his speech explicitly attempts to explain eros in the technical terms of *bodily* motion. And the comic effect of the hiccoughs is only amplified by the remedies that Doctor Eryximachus prescribes for Aristophanes. We must imagine Aristophanes sitting right beside Eryximachus, making not only the funny sounds and convulsions associated with the hiccough, but also the funny sounds and convulsions which would be associated with the doctor's prescribed remedies: gulping down a big breath of air and puffing out his cheeks before holding his breath, possibly turning red and blue in the face as he was doing so, then the de-oxygenated air bursting forth when he was no longer able to hold his breath followed by gasping for a fresh supply; flipping his head back and pouring water into his wide open mouth, and gargling vigorously and loudly, perhaps spewing and spraying some on his cheeks and neck; shoving things in and out of his nose and sneezing loudly. All the while, the doctor is trying to deliver a rather technical presentation of eros in terms of the 'repletions and evacuations' of the body. And knowing the doctor, Aristophanes could guess the sort of speech he would give; he could be fairly confident that the doctor's speech would create an ideal subject for the non-verbal comedic 'commentary' he performs while Eryximachus is speaking, and also for the more serious comedy of his own speech. If we understand Aristophanes' hiccoughs as an act of will rather than a spontaneous natural phenomenon, then this event suggests that the law is subverted not by chance but by the purpose of the poet. There is a lesson here about the efficacy of comedy as an instrument for effecting political change. Aristophanes' comedy subverts the law and makes the ruler appear ridiculous. It is in the nature of comedy that it is hard to defend against when it is used for the purposes of such an attack. This particular ruler is especially ill-suited to deal with such an attack because he apparently understands little of what makes people laugh; he only understands his own kind of seriousness, and the more serious he tries to be, the more ridiculous he appears when juxtaposed with the comic. Such a ruler is especially vulnerable to comedy. He would not be nearly so vulnerable to other types of attack, e.g., a 'reasoned' argument against his rule. One need only try to imagine Pausanius presenting an argument as to why he should speak after Eryximachus rather than before, and whether he could have had the same success with his arguments as Aristophanes had with his hiccoughs, in order to see this point.

It is perhaps not possible definitively to settle the question of whether Aristophanes' hiccoughs are purposeful acts of will or spontaneous natural phenomena, but however that may be, it is clear that they have the effect of altering the order of the speeches (*logoi*) of *Symposium*. If the speeches of *Symposium* taken as a whole constitute one overarching argument (*logos*), i.e., the Platonic argument, then it is clear that the hiccoughs have the effect of placing the parts of that argument in their Platonic order; Plato somehow owes the order of his argument to Aristophanes.[111] One can thus better understand the Platonic argument by considering how Aristophanes' hiccoughs affect the order of its parts. The order of the parts which would have obtained had he not had the hiccoughs differs from the order we actually end up with as follows: instead of Phaedrus, Pausanius, Aristophanes, Eryximachus, Agathon, Socrates, and then Alcibiades, we actually end up with Phaedrus, Pausanius, Eryximachus, Aristophanes, and so on. What is the significance of this difference? The place to begin to consider this issue is at the first point where Aristophanes' hiccoughs make a difference: how would it affect the argument of *Symposium* if Aristophanes spoke after Pausanius, as his sitting next to him would otherwise have determined?

---------- * ---------- * ----------

This question can of course be fully answered only following an adequate consideration of all the individual speeches. But Aristophanes will shortly make a comment that suggests an answer to it. Once Eryximachus has spoken in his stead, and his hiccoughs have stopped, Aristophanes commences with his own eulogy to eros.

---

[111] To rephrase, here in the only dialogue where Aristophanes makes an appearance, Plato acknowledges with the hiccough episode an intellectual debt to Aristophanes, he acknowledges that his argument (*logos*) has been affected by Aristophanes. This is, in effect, a Platonic footnote to Aristophanes.

Immediately before doing so, however, he says: "I do intend to speak in a somewhat different vein from that in which you and Pausanius spoke" (189c). The way that he puts *them* (i.e., them alone, of all undetermined number of previous speakers) together suggests that he sees them as being of a kind. Following this suggestion, we see further textual evidence to indicate that they are indeed of a kind. Eryximachus prefaces his own eulogy to Eros with a comment on that of Pausanius, the immediately preceding speaker:

> Well, in my opinion, since Pausanius made a *kalos*[112] start to his speech but did not adequately complete it, it is necessary for me to try to put a complete end to the argument. (185e-a)

This reminds us that Pausanius also prefaced his own eulogy with a comment on that of a preceding speaker, Phaedrus:

> Phaedrus, in my opinion, it is not *kalos* the way the argument has been proposed to us – commanding us to eulogize Eros in so unqualified a fashion. (180c)

With their first words, both men indicate that they think of what is *kalos* in more or less the same way: not as 'beautiful' or 'noble', but more in terms of what is 'correct', as virtually a synonym for *othos*. According to Pausanius, Phaedrus' speech was not *kalos* because he made a mistake: eros is two and not one. According to Eryximachus, Pausanius began correctly in dividing eros, but the whole of his argument was not *kalos* because he did not properly understand the implications of this division, and so he was not able to bring his argument to its logical conclusion. This common beginning suggests that both Eryximachus and Pausanius lack a sense of nobility or beauty (and this suggestion is confirmed by the balance of each man's speech). For, however important it may be to be correct, *kalos* is not the same as *orthos*. To consider just the counter-example perhaps most pertinent to this evening of speeches, an argument can be rhetorically effective and convincing because beautiful, even if altogether *in*correct.

The connection between Pausanius and Eryximachus indicated by their common beginning is intriguing, and seems to suggest that a deeper understanding of the dialogue might be gained by considering in some detail how these speeches relate to each other. I will now attend to this. Eryximachus approves of the beginning of Pausanius' speech. There, Pausanius divided eros into Uranian and pandemian, or 'high' and 'low'. This division corresponded roughly to the soul/body dichotomy, which is largely what accounted for the rhetorical effectiveness of his speech. That is to say, he appealed to the common sense or pre-scientific view (which is one of the reasons why his speech must precede that of Eryximachus) that the soul is both real and of greater dignity than the body. There is a wide variety of evidence to support the common sense view, perhaps the most compelling of which is the difference between a live and a dead body (a body being live by virtue of the soul, a corpse being simply 'dead' matter). As we shall soon see, Eryximachus' materialistic metaphysic actually obliterates what would seem to be one of the most fundamental – or, at any rate, most obvious – distinctions of all, the distinction between the living and non-living worlds. In this case, as in so many, his scientific view will require the suspension of common sense. Precisely because of this, in order for it to gain common acceptance, it has *to begin* with an appeal to common opinions. It is because Pausanius' speech began with an appeal to common opinions – to 'what we all know' – about the gods of the city, that Eryximachus endorses it. But he does so in a way that gives him the appearance of accepting those opinions, while in fact according him an opportunity to begin to alter those opinions: "Inasmuch as Eros is double, it is, in my opinion, a fine thing to divide him" (186a). Pausanius began by saying that eros is 'two' (180d), whereas Eryximachus says that eros is 'double'. We shall have to be on the look-out for the meaning of this subtle alteration.

---

[112] See n. 58, p. 45 above.

For Eryximachus , eros has an all-encompassing kind of power, and it seems that as he understands this power, it breaks down the 'conventionality' of Pausanius' speech. His 'diagnosis' of that speech is that it was basically sound but overly circumscribed, inasmuch as it was needlessly limited to human souls:

> … but that [Eros] presides not only over the souls of human beings in regard to the *kalos* but also in regard to many other things and in other cases – the bodies of all the animals as well as those things that grow in the earth, and just about all the things that are – that, in my opinion, I have come to see from medicine, our art. (186a)

Eryximachus will show that the double eros applies not just to our souls in regard to the beautiful, but also to the plants, animals, and the inanimate world – indeed even the weather. The problem is that in 'going beyond' the soul, he loses it. He tries to explain virtually everything in a unified way; he has come to see the near total power of the double eros, as he says, from his art, medicine, and so he understands everything in terms of body. But it is not clear that everything can be understood in the same way, for he is actually talking about four seemingly very different things: the human soul, the animal soul, the vegetative soul and inanimate matter.[113] Eros seems most directly pertinent to the first thing, the human soul, *especially* as it relates to the *kalon* in its original, most literal meaning: beautiful. At any rate, any account of eros that did not somehow explain the role of the *kalon* in human life would not be consistent with our actual experience of eros. And so far as we know, only the rational soul of human beings has any kind of appreciation for it (cf. Aristotle *Politics* 1253a7-a17; Plato *Republic* 411b, 441e-a): all available evidence seems to suggest the other animals are indifferent to beauty, the plants certainly are, and inanimate matter 'appreciates' nothing. It would seem then that an adequate account of eros would be preoccupied with the souls of human beings and their directedness towards the *kalon*.

But the above quoted mention of souls is the only one in his eulogy.[114] Without souls, Eryximachus is forced to explain the human connection to the *kalon* in terms of bodies, the highest good of which is health: what is *kalos* is that which is good for the body – health. In effect, the *kalon* becomes simply the healthy. Similarly, he is driven to conflate *aischros* (shameful/ugly) with sickly:[115]

---

[113] For Aristotle, all four 'levels' of these things inhere in man (*On the Soul* 412a1-415a12). This suggests an alternative strategy with which to generate a single coherent understanding of the universe: one based on a largely introspective consideration of the whole man.

[114] It is also the case that 'nature' is only mentioned once in his eulogy to eros, in his 'principle of bodies' (186b). The similar treatment is interesting. Eryximachus finds it necessary to make an early acknowledgement of both nature and souls, but quickly moves to distance himself from both. He somehow senses that, while both must be acknowledged, the idea of each is contrary to his purpose. And as he thinks little about each, he understands neither. The way that Plato presents nature and souls in Eryximachus' eulogy suggests that they go together: a lack of understanding of one implies a lack of understanding of the other – including of its power of understanding.

[115] Eryximachus conflates healthy with noble, and sickly with base, throughout his speech. This is surely one of the deficiencies of his speech and points to the problem with the technical understanding of the world. It inevitably arises from the tendency to see everything in the same (material) terms. But while his conflation is a mistake, it succeeds to the extent that it does because it seems to make some sense – i.e., healthy seems more a precondition of beauty, sickness is ugly. Presumably, something accounts for this.

> Just as Pausanius was saying, it is a *kalon* thing to gratify those who are good among human beings,[116] and *aischron* to gratify the intemperate,[117] so too, in the case of people's bodies taken by themselves is it a *kalos* and needful thing to gratify the good and healthy things of each body (this is what has the name 'the medical'); but it is *aischros* to gratify the bad and sickly things, and one has to abstain from favouring them, if one is to be skilled.[118] (186b-c)

Eryximachus claims here that the gratification of good human beings has the same status as the gratification of the healthy things of each body: both are *kalos*. The effect of this is to deprive the *kalon* of its specifically human meaning. Thirst is a healthy thing of the body, which we gratify by drinking. Is this *kalos*? People who drink when they are thirsty are simply sensible, satisfying bodily needs. No one ever said of the man who drank simply to quench his thirst that his action, though correct or sensible, was also *kalos*. What is lost here is any meaningful notion of the *kalon*. Similarly, Eryximachus cannot adequately account for the *aischron*. To assert that it is *aischros* (ugly or shameful or base) to gratify an unhealthy craving for sweets by eating candy is to render the idea of *aischros* trivial, if not vacuous. Our actual *experience* of *kalos* and *aischros* has a profound effect on us, and there is nothing in his account that can explain this.[119] It cannot explain the things that matter most to us.

---

[116] Note that this actually ignores eros. Eros is not itself either gratification, or a wish to gratify, whether of good or bad people.

[117] Moderation is the highest virtue for Eryximachus, because it is the one whose intrinsic goodness he can most plausibly account for terms of health. Moderate behaviour is for Eryximachus healthy behaviour: one who is moderate avoids unhealthy things, or if he does indulge in them, he does so 'moderately' – i.e., carefully, and in such a way as to minimize the unhealthy consequences of indulgence.

[118] If the noble is the healthy, then it becomes plausible to argue that it can be managed much as a doctor manages health. Virtue becomes a matter of technical skill for Eryximachus, something that an expert administers rather than something that a good man is or practices.

[119] The point can be illustrated with the way he introduces his account of medicine: "I shall begin my speech with medicine, so that we may venerate that art as well" (186b). There is nothing in his account of eros that would explain his desire to honour his art. This desire does, however, reveal something about his own eros. His eulogy to eros is really more a eulogy to medicine; what he really loves is medicine, or more specifically, the power of medicine. More specifically still, he loves the power that he personally derives from it. In honouring his art, he honours himself as practitioner of his art. But his eulogy to medicine is the less effective precisely because it is deficient in terms of beauty.

Of course, this is also true of Pausanius' account (although he at least attempts to make a connection between eros and something we readily recognize as *kalos*, virtue). Neither man has, as I have said, a strong sense of the *kalon*. This is closely related to the fact that for both men, the good is pleasure. We have already seen this in the case of Pausanius,[120] and – although it is less obvious in the case of Eryximachus – we will see it as the speech of Eryximachus unfolds. Eryximachus will continue the derogation from politics begun by Pausanius, which has been depicted by the political story of *Symposium*.

Briefly to recall the political story to this point, Phaedrus' speech corresponds to the historically first city, wherein the laws are accepted in an unquestioning fashion, and wherein the ancestral is viewed as good. This first city must actually be good in the sense that it at least exists as a unified whole, and is, therefore, a city which is animated by a viable principle of justice. But precisely because the people of this first city are unreflective about law and authority, they are especially vulnerable to people who are reflective about them, people like Pausanius. Succumbing to this vulnerability, the first city devolves into the city which someone like Pausanius engenders: the city characterized by an awareness of the artificial or man-made character of convention and the laws. The approach to the laws in this city is motivated by the calculus of 'rational self-interest', and the good from which this calculus takes its bearings is pleasure. Whereas in the first city the good is equated with the ancestral, in the second city the good is equated with pleasure. Eryximachus is thoroughly at home in the second city. His own argument is expressly intended to build on that of Pausanius, or as he states it, his intention is to "try to put a complete end [*télos*] to the argument" (186a).[121] Eryximachus presents a technical and materialistic understanding of erotic man and eros generally. If his argument really is the logical conclusion of Pausanius' argument, then we could say that the equation of the good with pleasure ultimately issues in a materialistic understanding of life and a preoccupation with technology.

---

[120] E.g., see pp. 83-86 above.

[121] There is a kind of irony to the fact that Eryximachus intends to bring Pausanius' argument to its end or *telos*, inasmuch as Pausanius intended to construct a non-teleological argument. But Eryximachus can bring the argument to its end because he really is more rational and hence better equipped than Pausanius to see the logical conclusion of the argument.

---------- * ---------- * ----------

In completing Pausanius' argument, Eryximachus appears simply to accept his basic division of eros into pandemian and Uranian, but as I have observed above, he in fact subtly alters it. Pausanius' correction of Phaedrus was that eros is not one (*heis*) but two (*dúo*, 180c-d), whereas Eryximachus says that eros is double (*diploûn*, 186a). Why does Eryximachus substitute 'double' for 'two'? The substitution accomplishes two things. First, inasmuch as 'double' is inherently relational, this substitution signals a more thoroughly relational account of eros. Pausanius introduced the relational understanding of eros, but this was driven more by his own erotic experience than any kind of rigorous reflection on the relational character of eros. As a lover, he has the direct and urgent experience of his own desire for the beloved, which is what drove his speech. The important erotic relation for him is the lover/beloved relation. This relation is represented in his speech by the constant association between the goddesses Aphrodite and the gods Eros (180d).[122] But, because he has so little distance from this relation, he is hardly 'objective' about it, and he more assumes it than explains it. By contrast, Eryximachus is much less erotic, and hence less preoccupied with the lover/beloved relation, which is why there are no goddesses Aphrodite in his speech. He looks at erotic phenomena with the dispassionate and 'objective' gaze of the scientist. Because of this, he develops an account of the phenomena wherein they do not seem recognizably erotic. In place of the lover/beloved relation, he ends up with a focus on relations between 'things' that are for the most part material.

Second, his substitution of 'double' for 'two' also has the effect of de-emphasizing the plural aspect of Pausanius' presentation of eros, while at the same time still somehow maintaining it. 'Double' is both a unity and a plurality: 'double' as twice something is still a single whole, the same as the thing that was doubled, only more of it;[123] but 'double' as composed of two parts is two (i.e., the two halves of the whole, cf. *Republic*, 438c with 479b). The substitution of 'double' for 'two' allows Eryximachus to speak of eros as either one or two, as it suits his purposes. For example, he uses the double eros to refer to the health and the sickness of the body and the two loves which rule over them (which he implicitly equates with the Uranian and pandemian, 186b with 187e). He has to have something like two separate loves (or powers – eros is for him a power – e.g., 188d), because this is how he explains why there is sickness in addition to health. But at the same time, he wants to present eros as a unity,[124] because what he is attempting is the outline of something like what today might be called a 'unified theory' of the universe. He speaks of "just about all the things that are" in a single breath (186a), because for him these things are of a piece. If it is all of a piece, then it can all be known in the same way.

---

[122] The role of the Aphrodites can be understood as that of beloved. Pausanius speaks of each Eros as belonging to the corresponding Aphrodite (181a-b and 185b), which is how a slave relates to a master, and he characterizes the lover as enslaved to the beloved (183a and 184c).

For Eryximachus, everything can be known in the way matter is known. The fundamental issue with which Eryximachus' speech confronts the reader is whether one can account for man and the larger natural order within which he lives with matter alone, i.e., without soul. Perhaps more importantly, it shows us the effect on man of trying to deny the reality of soul. This makes his speech particularly important for specifically modern man, inasmuch as arguably the most salient feature of modern man is his denial of soul. This denial is based above all else on a deep-seated belief in the power of modern science, a belief that has been ratified by the experience of the undeniable technological success of the modern scientific project over the last few centuries. The peculiar virtue of Eryximachus' speech for us moderns is that it explicates a view that is in its broad outlines essentially the same as the modern scientific view. Both are composed, at root, of matter set in motion by one or two basic principles or powers. His speech is in this respect eerily prescient.

---

[123] As when, at a tavern, one orders 'a double'.

[124] Rosen sees basically the same point:

> ....despite his acceptance of a double Eros, Eryximachus refers to the god, exactly as did Phaedrus. And he concludes his speech by referring to the "total power" of "Eros conceived as a whole" (188d). See Rosen *Plato's* Symposium 99.

Common sense and experience (i.e., pre-scientific reasoning) tells us that eros is a power. If the reality of the soul is denied, then one is forced to try to explain it as a power both originating in and governing exclusively material things. Eros thus has to be understood much like gravity. The heart of Eryximachus' account of the universe is the gravity-like double eros, a power that blindly pushes matter around. He has come to know about the double eros, he says, through his art, medicine, which is directed to the health of the human body (186a). For Eryximachus, the microcosm within which the cosmos is reproduced is the human body.

He enunciates the following basic principle of bodies to explain them:

> The nature[125] of bodies has this double Eros, for the health and the sickness of the body are by agreement different and dissimilar; and the dissimilar desires and loves dissimilar things [*tò dè anómoion anomoiōn epithumeî kaì erâ*]. (186b)

This sentence is as confusing in Greek as in English. At first glance, it appears to mean that the nature of bodies has an eros that could be characterized as something to the effect of, 'opposites attract'. But upon examination of the whole of his speech, it is clear that the harmony of similar things is important in his explanation of the health of bodies. Accordingly, one can *also* read it to mean that the nature of bodies has an eros which could be characterized as something to the effect of, 'like to like' (i.e., that what is dissimilar from other things desires and loves what is likewise dissimilar, or what is like to itself). His principle of bodies is amenable to two different readings because he explains it in terms of *a* 'double Eros' that often seems to be, after all, *two separate* erotes. The separateness of the erotes is more apparent than the unity as he further develops his principle of bodies: "Therefore, one love is on the healthy condition, another on the sickly" (186b). These two erotes would seem to be not only separate, but rather altogether opposed,[126] inasmuch as the healthy and sickly conditions are opposed. This would seem to suggest that what he really has is not *a principle* of *all* bodies, but rather a principle of healthy bodies and a principle of sickly bodies. But at other points in his eulogy he speaks of bodies in a way that presupposes a single principle of bodies and the unity of the two erotes. For example, Eryximachus gives a summary statement of exactly what constitutes the practice of the art of medicine that begins as follows:

---

[125] This is the only occurrence of the word 'nature' (*phúsis*) in his speech (cf. n. 114, p. 111 above). Pausanius also used the word only once. We could say that this similarity is explained by the fact that Eryximachus, like Pausanius, has a 'love/hate' relationship with nature, although for different reasons. As will become clear below, in Eryximachus' case, this is because he has to 'love' nature inasmuch as it in fact provides the power of his art and the standard of health that guides it, but he 'hates' it because it thus implies that he as doctor is subservient to nature, or that he is merely ministerial to its power. He is forced to mention nature here at the outset, because medicine is literally unintelligible apart from it, but then he lets it drop because it seems to speak against his own importance.

> For the art of medicine is, under one head, the knowledge of the erotics of the body in regard to repletion and evacuation. (186c)

This summary statement shows that he understands *the* erotics of *the* body in terms of the specific motions of repletion and evacuation.[127] That is to say, he understands love – *both* kinds of love – in terms of both kinds of motion; he is not saying, for example, that the motion of repletion is the sickly love. Either love can be understood in terms of the motions of repletion and evacuation. The important point here is that he understands eros as motion. The two loves are thus the same, and not essentially opposed, inasmuch as they are both, at bottom, simply motions. In sum, his principle of bodies can be read in two ways: as a principle of healthy bodies and a principle of sickly bodies, and as a single unified principle of all bodies.

The stupid or gravity-like quality of the double eros comes out especially clearly in his summary statement of what constitutes the practice of the art of medicine:

> [H]e who diagnostically discriminates in these things [i.e., the motions – the erotics of the body in regard to 'repletion and evacuation'] between the noble and the base love is the one who is the most skilled in medicine; while he who induces changes, so as to bring about the acquisition of one love from the opposed love, and who, in whatever things where there is no love but there needs must be, has the knowledge to instil it, or to remove it from those things in which it is [but should not be], would be a good craftsman [or ' demiurge'; *dēmiourgós*]. For he must, in point of fact, be able to make the things that are most at enmity [or, 'most hated'; *échthista*] in the body into friends [*phila*] and to make them love [*érân*] one another. The most opposite

---

[126] This is, at any rate, how Eryximachus often thinks of them. We can see this in his description of the good craftsmanship of the doctor, who induces changes, "so as to bring about the acquisition of one love from the opposed love [*hōste antì toû etérou érōtos tòn éteron ktâsthai*]" (186b).

[127] He narrows down the types of bodily motions that are pertinent to the art of medicine, for clearly not any and all bodily motions are or could be. For example, the motion of a running body is not a motion that is apprehended by the art of medicine (but rather by the trainer's art). The kind of motions that he is trying to capture with 'repletion and evacuation' are the internal motions of the body. These are the erotics of the body.

> things are the most at enmity: cold and hot, bitter and sweet, and dry and moist, and anything of the sort. (186c-e)

Love and hate (there are times in his speech when the sickly love half of the double eros amounts to hate) are powers that move the things of the body around in healthy or sickly ways. One who is practiced in the art of medicine can distinguish which motions or loves of the things of the body are healthy (what he here calls noble) and which are sickly (what he here calls base). It takes this same skill to bring about the "acquisition of one love from the opposed love", or to turn a sickly motion of the things of the body into a healthy one. And it takes this same skill to instil love, "where there is no love but there needs must be", which is to say, instil the proper motion amongst the things of the body where there is none. One who can do these things is a good craftsman or demiurge. And he must be able to make the most opposed things of the body into friends and to *make* them love one another. Eryximachus develops his idea of the healthy love in a discussion of music, which he says is "on the same level" as medicine (186e-a). Speaking about music education, he says:

> the love of the ordered must be guarded. And this love is the noble one, the Uranian, the Eros of the Uranian muse. (187d)

Since for him the healthy love *is* the noble love (and likewise the sickly love is base, 186b-d), we can take it that the healthy love is the love of the ordered. Health is an 'ordered' state. And his discussion of music makes clear his peculiar understanding of what constitutes order:

> [F]or there surely would no longer be a harmony from high and low notes while they were differing from each other; for harmony is consonance, and consonance is a kind of agreement. But it is impossible to derive agreement from differing things as long as they are differing. (187b)

Eryximachus further insists that "it is a lot of nonsense to affirm that a harmony differs from itself or is composed of still differing things" (187a). Things that are different are necessarily in a state of disorder; order is the harmony or 'agreement' of non-differing things. The implication is that the healthy love is the philiatic one of 'like to like'. It is important to see here that this philiatic love is simply determined by the quality of *things*: i.e., things that are like are *ipso facto* in a relationship of healthy love with each other. This clarifies his understanding of how the doctor creates health in bodies. The doctor, the skilled craftsman of the body, in making the most opposed things of the body into friends and making them love one another, *actually makes* them *be* like one another, for Eryximachus argues that agreement only obtains among things which are not differing. *This is how* he turns a sickly motion or love of the things of the body into a healthy one. It is the motion of the like things of the body which constitutes the *ordered* relationship of health, and the doctor must be able to create health in the body. If, by contrast, the things in motion in the body are not in agreement, or like, if they are rather opposed, then they are in the *disordered* relationship of sickness; this is the eros of 'opposites attract'.[128] It is the business of the doctor to cure sickness, and he does so by eliminating the opposites among the things of the body that are in motion, by making them actually 'like' one another. The dual eros is both one and two in the following sense: eros as motion is one, but the motion is two – healthy or sick – as it is ordered or disordered, and it is ordered or disordered as the things in motion are like or unlike. The two key components of Eryximachus' cosmology are matter and motion, but what makes motion of a distinctive kind is ultimately a function of the matter in motion. He is a strict materialist.

---------- * ---------- * ----------

Because of his strict materialism, Eryximachus is driven to explain living things by reducing them down to their material elements, and accounting for the motion of those living things with fixed laws of motion. Eryximachus' treatment of eros could be said to be the 'opposite' (*enantios*) of Socrates' treatment of eros in *Republic*, and we are meant to consider each in light of the other. Whereas Eryximachus' speech is a eulogy to eros that presents the whole human being by abstracting from soul, Socrates' speech in *Republic* is a condemnation of eros that presents the whole human being by abstracting from body. The statement of this opposition must be amended at once, however, for the 'condemnation' of eros found in *Republic* is only *apparent*, and makes sense only as a condemnation of that eros which is closely associated with the body. It is only because the importance of the body and its legitimate needs are not explicitly recognized in *Republic* that the condemnation of the eros that is closely associated with the body appears justified – more so than it otherwise would. The opposition then reduces to the presentation of the whole human being as an abstraction from soul versus as an abstraction from body. This relationship, however, is not so much opposed as complementary. Reflecting upon it draws one into a consideration of the relationship between the physical and the psychical.

---

[128] The sickly love is harder to understand than the healthy love. As we have just seen, his explicit characterization of the relationship between opposites is one of hatred rather than love. However, the sickly love is in fact the same thing as hatred: the relationship between opposite things is for him necessarily a disorderly one, and disorder is the essence of sickly love. It should be noted that Eryximachus is the first in *Symposium* to speak of hate, and that this first occurrence: a) actually implies hate is a species of love, and b) associates hate with disorder.

This relationship comes closest at the part of the basic psychology of *Republic* which comes closest to the body, the part that deals with the eros of the body, or what are commonly referred to as the bodily desires (437d-439b). For this reason, it is useful to consider this part in some detail.[129] Socrates uses thirst and hunger as paradigms of these desires. To take the example of thirst, Socrates says that, "the soul of a man who thirsts, insofar as it thirsts, wishes nothing other than to drink, and strives for this and is impelled toward it" (*Republic*, 439a-b). Socrates explains human bodily desire entirely in terms of one's conscious *awareness* of it in the soul. As he says, it is the soul of a man that thirsts; thirst is 'a desire in the soul'. This is the opposite of what Eryximachus does. Although it is the physical body which has need of physical drink if it is to continue to exist in health, and which need can indeed be convincingly accounted for in physical terms, the physical need only gives rise to, and is not therefore the same as, the desire an actual human being has for drink. Rather, the soul, aware that the physical body over which it rules has a need of physical drink, therefore (typically) reaches out to satisfy the need of its body. Strictly speaking, on Socrates' account, the body does not *desire* anything.

Every bodily desire is conceptually related to the object of its desire, and is unintelligible apart from its object.

> Insofar as it's thirst, would it be a desire in the soul for something more than that of which we say it is a desire? For example, is thirst thirst for hot drink or cold, or much or little, or, in a word, for any particular kind of drink? Or isn't it rather that in the case where heat is present in addition to the thirst, the heat would cause the desire

---

[129] In the following comments on the psychology of *Republic*, I draw heavily on Leon Craig's analysis in *The War Lover: A Study of Plato's* Republic 86-93.

> to be also for something cold as well; and where coldness, something hot; and where thirst is much on the account of muchness, it will cause the desire to be for much, and where it's little, for little? But, thirsting itself will never be a desire for anything other than that of which it naturally is a desire – for drink alone – and, similarly, hungering will be a desire for food? (*Republic* 437d-e)

Being thirsty and hungry, Socrates says, is to desire drink and food, and only drink and food, simply. If we have a bodily desire that the drink be hot or cold, or much or little, it is because different physical conditions are present which give rise to additional bodily desires. Because every bodily desire is a desire for its object simply, the bodily desires can be distinguished on the basis of their objects, to the extent that their objects are distinguishable: hunger is the desire for food, thirst is the desire for drink.

All physical things are inherently 'relative'; no physical thing is, for example, absolutely hot, or absolutely cold. All the objects of bodily desire, being physical things, are 'relative' in this way. There is no absolutely hot or absolutely cold drink. 'Hot' is relative to 'cold'; hot chocolate is hot relative to iced tea, but it is not *as* hot relative to warm milk. In addition, the objects of our bodily desires are 'relative' *to us*. That is to say, the objects of our desire are more or less, or hot or cold, or whatever, as we desire much or little, or warmth or coolness, or whatever. The objects of our bodily desires are good or healthy for us in this same relative way: a hot drink is more or less healthy to our bodies relative to the physical condition of our bodies at the moment when we drink. The healthy human body has an equilibrium temperature of 98.6° F. To take a hot drink when the body is only a few degrees warmer than this would be unhealthy because it would raise rather than lower the temperature of the body, and a bodily temperature only a few degrees in excess of 98.6° F can be lethal.

Socrates' discussion of the bodily desires and the relativity of physical things follows immediately upon his presentation of the Law of Non-Contradiction (*Republic*, 436b-437b). The importance of this fundamental Law of Reason can hardly be exaggerated, as it underlies all rational analysis and discourse. The Law requires that claims can be inconsistent or contradictory, and that when they are, both cannot be true. Its reality rests upon the reality of opposites. Socrates presents the Law in terms of the opposition between the motion and stillness of physical things. Eryximachus understands eros as the motion of physical things. Socrates' presentation of the Law is consistent with Eryximachus' presentation of eros. But the inherent relativity of physical qualities shows that, if the Law is valid, it cannot ultimately rest upon the opposition of physical values.[130] This suggests that it must be grounded on psychical rather than physical values, i.e., on intelligible ideas, if it can be adequately grounded at all.[131] This should perhaps come as no surprise, given the context of the presentation of the Law: it is actually motivated by a consideration of the question of whether or not the soul has parts (*Republic*, 436a-b). That is, whereas the Law is stated in physical terms, it arises out of a psychical question.

Because the qualities of physical things are inherently 'relative', they cannot, strictly speaking, be 'opposites'. Yet, because of his strict materialism, Eryximachus can understand opposites only in terms of physical values. This error has direct implications for how he understands himself as doctor and the practice of his art. We can see this by juxtaposing the prominent role of 'opposite' physical things in his account of health with the 'relative' physical things in *Republic's* psychology of bodily desires. In his summary statement of what constitutes the practice of the art of medicine, Eryximachus offers three physical examples of the "most opposite things": cold and hot, bitter and sweet, dry and moist (186d). The cold and hot is immediately recognizable from *Republic's* psychology of bodily desires. Socrates says, in the above quote, that when heat is present in the body in addition to thirst, the soul desires not simply drink but cold drink. But what does it mean for heat to be present in the body? Heat is always present in the body – at least in the living body. What he has to mean by the presence of heat is that it be present in excess, i.e., that the body be hotter than its healthy internal equilibrium (or harmony, as Eryximachus would say). In applying the cold to the hot, it becomes cooler, which restores the harmony. The dry and moist is also recognizable from *Republic's* psychology of bodily desires, although not immediately. Thirst, the bodily desire for drink, can be understood in terms of this 'opposition', i.e., because of the presence of dryness, the body requires moisture to maintain a healthy internal equilibrium. In both cases, the 'bodily desire' for some physical object arises directly out of the physical condition of the body, and the goodness or health of that object for the body is likewise a function of the physical condition of the body.[132] The issue of central importance to the doctor's practice of medicine is the relativity of physical things as they pertain to the health of the human body. But this relativity actually implies a role of diminished importance for the doctor as regards health; the doctor did not create this relativity – nature did. In treating these physical things as 'opposite', and thus implicitly as absolute rather than relative values, Eryximachus is able to overstate the importance of the role of the doctor: according to him, the doctor must be able to *make* the 'opposite' things like hot and cold into friends and like one another, which is a remarkable feat if these things are indeed not at all alike and even opposed. He thus implies that health obtains through the agency of the doctor. But the truth is that it obtains naturally. If we pour a glass of iced tea and a cup of hot chocolate into a bowl, the hot becomes cooler and the cold becomes warmer. We do not thereby *make* this happen; all we do is introduce the cold and the hot.[133] Eryximachus' point is that the doctor has the ability to apply the hot or cold to cold or hot bodies, but the reader has to see that he does not thereby alter the nature of the hot and cold, nor of the body. The implication, an uncomfortable one for Eryximachus, is that his art does not contribute anything beyond what is already inherent in nature.[134] Since medicine is the art that is representative of all the arts,[135] we wonder if all the arts are like this.

---

[130] The fact that Socrates nevertheless explains the law in physical terms can be explained by the pedagogical requirements of the situation with which he is confronted: Glaucon could not so readily understand the Law if Socrates illustrated it in psychical terms. Few of us could.

[131] This is a very big 'if'. Note the thoroughly provisional and hypothetical quality of the manner in which Socrates and Glaucon accept the Law (*Republic*, 437a). Given that 'opposites' play such an important role in Eryximachus' acount of eros, his inadequate explanation of them, and the fact that, upon reflection, his examples of 'opposites' turn out to be not really so 'opposed' at all, it seems we are meant to wonder whether opposites are, after all, real. The need to consider the reality of opposites is further suggested when Plato has Eryximachus take issue with the 'words' of Heracleitus: "For he says that the one 'alone in differing with itself agrees with itself'", which is a clear violation of the Law (187a). Of course, the 'words' for which Heracleitus is most famous are "all things change", which, if true, imply that there can be no opposites. According to Aristotle, Heracleitus denied the Law because he asserted that certain opposites are 'one'. Heracleitus apparently had what might today be referred to as a linguistic approach to philosophy, his central category being Greek *logos* (Hornblower and Spawforth, p 687). The possibility is thus subtly suggested here that opposites are simply linguistic phenomena, and so grounded in human nature *per se* and not necessarily in the larger natural order. This is not necessarily to suggest that Plato agrees with Heracleitus on this issue, only that we are meant to wonder as to the basis of opposites, and so too of rational discourse. Nietzsche recognizes the problematic character of opposites, and examines its implications in *Beyond Good and Evil*, most prominently in Part 1. In Aphorism 2, he observes:

> The fundamental faith of metaphysicians is *the faith in antithetical values*. It has not occurred to even the most cautious of them to pause and doubt here in the threshold, where however it was most needful that they should: even if they had vowed to themselves '*de omnibus dubitandum*'. For it may be doubted, firstly whether there exist any antithesis at all, and secondly whether these popular evaluations and value-antitheses, on which the metaphysicians have set their seal, are not perhaps merely foreground evaluations, merely provisional perspectives[.]

---

[132] The middle 'opposition', between the bitter and sweet, is not recognizable from *Republic's* psychology of bodily desires, which suggests that it is not a physical thing in the same sense as the others. The bitter and sweet are attributes of the food and drink we consume which are pertinent to the question of whether or not it tastes good to us, i.e., they pertain to cookery and not to medicine. The bitter/sweet 'opposition' reminds us that not every desire for a physical object arises directly out of the physical condition of the body; some desires for physical objects can only be explained with reference to our souls (e.g., the desire for wine). This obviously points to the problem with Eryximachus' abstraction from soul.

---------- * ---------- * ----------

---

[133] According to Francis Bacon, all technological power is, at bottom, nothing more than man's bringing together or taking asunder the things of nature (*New Organon* 4th aph).

[134] Rather, the doctor understands through his art the nature of the human body, and so too what physical things it needs for health, and when and how best to supply them. He is a helper of nature. The modern day humanist doctor, Leon Kass, says it well:

> [T]he healthy state is a certain balance or harmony of parts or elements that – and this is the crucial point – *the healthy or harmonized body will produce on its own*, provided it acquires the right materials and is not obstructed, say, by superior invasive forces. The *body is its own healer*, and the physician a cooperative but subordinate partner who supplies the needed materials – whether it be protein or insulin, vitamin C or interferon, and, by extension, even antibiotics to help the body arrest invasive obstruction from without. I do not insist that all current treatments can be rationalized on this homely model of supplying the necessaries, nor do I mean to assert that health is homeostasis – though I do think that the time is ripe for a return to these philosophical matters. Rather, I mean to emphasize the Hippocratic Oath's tacit assertion that medicine is a cooperative rather than a transforming art, and that the physician is but an assistant to nature working within, the body having its own powerful (even if not invincible) tendencies towards healing itself (e.g., wound healing and other regenerative activities, or the rejection of foreign bodies and the immune response). Though our current technical prowess tends to make us forget these matters, does not the Oath speak truly? (Kass *Towards a More Natural Science* 233)

[135] See p. 37 above.

Because of his strict materialism, Eryximachus is driven to argue that the qualities of living beings, and in particular of living human beings, are somehow inherent in their material elements. But they are not. The absurdity of this position is apparent in Eryximachus' summary statement of the practice of medicine (186c-e). It is absurd to say that there are *things* in the body that hate each other. There may be things in the body that (electro-magnetically) repel one another, things that are in some sense 'opposite', but this is not the same as hate. The proposition only has whatever apparent sense it has on the basis of a kind of linguistic sleight of hand (i.e., that what is 'opposed' hates). Similarly, love and friendship cannot be thought of as the attraction of the things of the body. It is only the whole human being that hates or loves. One cannot 'build up' to the whole from the parts, or somehow derive the essential attributes of the whole human being from those of the parts out of which it is compounded, for the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (in that its distinctive qualities 'emerge' only out of the *ordering* of its parts), and is qualitatively different from them – just as water is qualitatively different from the two gases that compose it. Eryximachus cannot, therefore, do justice to the whole.

The soul inheres in the whole human being, and because he cannot do justice to the whole, he cannot comprehend the soul. All he really has is a partial account of the physical basis of life. Eryximachus tries to explain the whole human being in terms of the parts from which it is compounded because he perceives that those parts are more knowable, or more amenable to the kind of understanding that can be accessed through his art. If he can demonstrate a superior understanding of how all the parts work, *and* that this amounts to an understanding how the whole works – that it is simply the sum of its parts – then he establishes for himself an authority over human beings based on superior knowledge of human things. But in order to do this, one has either to assert that the parts are like the whole (i.e., that the parts of the body love and hate), or that the whole is like the parts (i.e., that the whole human being does not love and hate). Neither assertion is ultimately tenable. Eryximachus' approach here is to assert that the whole is like the parts. Love and hate are principles or powers governing the motion of the parts of the body, and in understanding these constant or unchanging principles of motion, the parts can be understood and manipulated through his art. Because the whole human being is like the parts, it can likewise be manipulated. He thus implies that he, at least potentially, has a technical command over human beings, because human beings love and hate ultimately on the basis of constant or unchanging principles of motion. But our actual experience of love and hate is nothing like that. The hate of a human being is not predictable in the way the repulsion of physical things is predictable, because the human being has mind (*nous*), and as a consequence some freedom from the strict necessity which rules over physical things. Being free from the necessity inherent in the physical, conscious action and reaction is impossible to reduce to the physical within us; this freedom of mind to assess, approve, and reject must therefore inhere in the non-physical, in the rational soul, which is capable of exercising choice. Because human beings have free-will and can exercise choice, they can overcome, intensify and otherwise exert control over their hate. The motion of a human being propelled by hate is thus qualitatively different from the motion of the physical things within the human body, inasmuch as the latter motion is essentially determined and hence has nothing to do with the exercise of free-will. Free-will is mysterious, and may well be impossible to understand. This difficulty is partly what makes the materialistic-deterministic metaphysic Eryximachus offers seem so attractive, for it seems to replace the obscurity of the free-will with clarity and simplicity.

I noted above that Eryximachus develops his idea of the healthy love in the context of a discussion of music, which he says is "on the same level" as medicine (186e-a). Yet music is almost purely immaterial; it is at bottom the imposition of form onto the union of sound and silence. Music thus represents a remarkable challenge for Eryximachus, for it baffles his materialism. Being non-material, it would seem to be simply unreal in terms of his materialistic-deterministic metaphysic. It would thus seem that he could just disregard it, much as he does soul. But he cannot quite bring himself to do this. The major scale derived acoustically by Pythagoras from the perfect fifth shows that music is amenable to the same sort of precision analysis as is body. The major scales are mathematical, and to the extent that music can be represented with major scales, it is determined. Although music is immaterial, the deterministic aspect of it appeals to him, for it is akin to the deterministic aspect of body, knowledge of which provides the scientific basis for technological power. This is why he thinks he can understand body and music in the same way. But while the major scales constitute a key to our understanding of music, they do not exhaust it. The physics of sound or harmony represent the technological aspect of music, but not all harmonic sound is music, much less fine music. There have been and are musicians who are able with the musical sounds they make to charm our souls,[136] and who know nothing of the major scales. It is precisely this charming power of music – its beauty – that seems to be the most important thing about it, and it is precisely this that remains for Eryximachus opaque owing to his technological fixation.

We could say that there are two parts to music, a technological and a 'charming' or aesthetic part, and, oddly, both are actually reflected in his discussion of music:

> And in the simple constitution of harmony and rhythm it is not at all hard to diagnose the erotics, *for the double eros is not yet present there*; but whenever rhythm and harmony have to be employed in regard to human beings, either by making rhythm and harmony (what they call lyric poetry) or by using correctly the songs and meters that have been made (what has been called education), it is difficult and a good craftsman is needed. (my italics, 187c-d)

The simple music is music that is simply determined in the way that the motion of the things of the body is simply determined, i.e., the simple music is the technological part of music. As Eryximachus explains it, it is only in relation to human beings that music becomes "difficult". This is because the simple music, the harmony of the celestial spheres for instance, always works as it should – being determined, it could be no other way. Human beings, however, complicate the matter because human beings move in ways that are not simply determined, i.e., human beings have a rational soul and its attendant free-will. The difficult music then is the part of music that charms our souls. What Eryximachus is actually talking about, contrary to his intention, is the soul/body dichotomy.[137] He suggests, on the basis of a parallel between the arts of music and medicine, that the good craftsman or demiurge can manipulate lyric poetry and education for the benefit of human beings, but his understanding of lyric poetry and education is necessarily inadequate for precisely the same reason his medical understanding of the whole human being is inadequate: because it abstracts from soul.

---

[136] And it must be noted that only *human* souls are charmed by music; there is no evidence that any other animals are.

[137] Cf. Bloom *Love and Friendship* 474.

Eryximachus' double eros is supposed to be the unifying principle of his cosmology. But because his cosmology rests on an abstraction from soul, it cannot adequately explain a cosmos endowed with soul. This problem is most evident whenever he addresses parts of the cosmos that are most directly pertinent to soul, especially the human being seeking to understand the cosmos. Eryximachus clearly knows nothing of this; he is an arrogant expounder of first principles who knows nothing of the knower. The intellectual horizon, in effect, the cosmos, of every individual human being is formed to a far larger extent than is commonly appreciated by the music education he receives. Speaking about music education, Eryximachus asserts:

> For the same argument returns here – namely, that ordered [*cosmios*] human beings must be gratified, as well as those who are not as yet ordered [*cosmiöteroi*], so that they might become more so, and the love [of the ordered] must be guarded. (187d)

The purpose of music education is to teach man about his place in the cosmos. To say this another way, the purpose of music education is to instil psychic order in the human being. And not just any order, but the right kind of order, one that is beneficial in that it supports life as a human being. Eryximachus does not, however, speak of a beneficial order, or any other kind of order; he speaks of order in an unqualified fashion. He has to, because his materialistic-deterministic metaphysic offers no basis upon which to distinguish good order from bad order. This problem is equally true of the modern science or technology that his metaphysic anticipates. The psychological effect of it is to lead people to believe either that order per se is good, or that there is no real difference between good and bad.[138] This is, however, manifestly false; Joseph Stalin and Adolf

---

[138] I emphasize that this inference is psychological and not logical. Even if it is true that human beings are simply compounded from bodily parts or, atoms or some such thing, it does not therefore follow from the fact that atoms are beyond good and evil that whole human beings are too. In the words of Leo Strauss:

> For, however indifferent to moral distinctions the cosmic order may be thought to be, human nature, as distinguished from nature in general, may very well be the basis of such distinctions. To illustrate the point by the example of the best-known pre-Socratic doctrine, namely, of atomism, the fact that the atoms are beyond good and bad does not justify the inference that there is nothing by nature good and bad for any compounds of atoms, and especially for those compounds which we call "men." In fact, no one can say that all distinctions between good and bad which men make or all human preferences are merely conventional. We must therefore distinguish between those human desires which are natural and those which originate in

Hitler were evidently well-ordered for their purposes, but they were not thereby good men. This thinking is disastrous politically, for it undercuts morality and leads to tyranny. If every order is just as good as the next, and there is no scientific basis upon which to call any order preferable to the next, then a preference for one over the other becomes a matter of 'taste'. All technology, or all that science which is knowledge of body or matter, is politically unwholesome because the knowledge is intrinsically amoral.[139]

As we have seen, for Eryximachus, it is ultimately *things* themselves that constitute order: a harmonious order is composed of 'like' things, i.e., things that are 'like' are *ipso facto* in a relationship of healthy love with each other. Thinking through

---

> conventions. Furthermore, we must distinguish between those human desires and inclinations which are in accordance with human nature and therefore good for man, and those which are destructive of his nature or his humanity and therefore bad. We are thus lead to the notion of a life, a human life, that is good because it is in accordance with nature. (*Natural Right and History* 94-95)

[139] See Book X of Plato's *Laws* for an in-depth account of exactly why this is so. Roughly, it is because strict materialism implies that ultimately only matter is real, and as matter is manifestly amoral, strict materialism also implies that morality is unreal. The argument can be stated in greater detail as follows. Strict materialism implies that matter is the first thing to come into being, and that soul is derivative from body or epiphenomenal (cf. 891c). This means that all the things of the soul – such as opinion, supervision, intelligence, art, and law (cf. 892b) – have a lesser status than the things of the body. As the most important things which exist by opinion and law are the gods, strict materialism necessarily lessens respect for the gods. Strictly speaking, there is no place for the gods in a material cosmos. This creates a moral problem insofar as beliefs about the gods underpin common opinions regarding justice. People without gods are apt to believe that justice as it is commonly understood does not exist by nature, but only by convention. For, without the gods, one must look for *evidence* of the existence of justice if one is to actually care about it, and the only readily apparent evidence for its existence is the laws. But the laws are endlessly debated, and changed this way and that, which makes them seem like a sham (889e). Convention apart from gods – 'mere' convention – is not likely to compel the respect of those who think they are strong. They think: if one had strength enough to break the laws with impunity, then one should do so whenever it suited one's purposes. The temptation to engage in this calculus of strength, to test one's strength against the law, and to see what one can 'get away with', is ever present. This is a tyrannous disposition, since for such a person, "what is most just is whatever allows someone to triumph by force" (89Oa). But, unlike laws, gods presumably see what men cannot and can thus never be fooled, and no mortal strength can rival theirs. The avenging gods who uphold the laws, unlike the laws apart from the gods, can never be slighted with impunity. The temptation to tyranny is thus amplified in the absence of gods.

his argument shows that the implication of strict materialism is chaos. If all matter really were 'like', then it would all form a single indistinguishable mass. If he is to provide an account of "just about all the things that are" that is consistent with our actual experience of those things, he has to be able to account for their manifest heterogeneity. As a materialist, he has to account for this heterogeneity in terms of matter, in terms of *things* that are 'unlike' or 'opposite'. But then he has no explanation of how it is that 'unlike' things cohere, and so he has chaos rather than cosmos. We find a parallel problem in his technological understanding of music, on the basis of which he asserts that there could not be a harmony from high and low notes while they were differing from each other (187b). He is, of course, simply wrong about this. There is indeed a harmony from high and low notes while they are still differing from each other. The high remains high and the low remains low, i.e., their harmony is 'complementary'; these things do *not* come to be more like each other, but maintain their highness and lowness throughout the music. If the high and low really did become more alike, the music would be flat, or rather just monotonic sound. It is the same with the fast and slow of rhythm: the fast and slow remain fast and slow – if not, the music would not be rhythmic (187b-c).[140] Whether he discusses material things or immaterial music, he has the same problem: he is unable to account for the manifest heterogeneity of the cosmos. In either case, he has no explanation of how it is that 'unlike' things cohere, or how they form a *uni-* rather than a *multi*verse. This is because he has in either case, for lack of a better term, a 'material' mindset, whereas what is required to account for the persistent unity of heterogeneous things is non- or extra-material powers. What Eryximachus really needs to explain the order of things is non-material principle, which is what the double eros initially seemed to promise, but which is precisely what, as a materialist, it turns out he is unable to provide. This is the basic problem to which every materialistic doctrine must succumb.

---

[140] It should be noted that his mistake has clear implications for human eros. Whereas his medical account of bodily eros indicates that lovers become more like each other (as he and Phaedrus have become alike in their valetudinarianism), the case of music indicates the continuing complementarity of differing lovers (as, for example, lovers of different sexes).

He thus fails completely at the cosmology he promised, and more particularly, in accounting for the order that his art presupposes. Technology only works on the basis of science, and science presupposes order. Material technology is utile only because the strictest necessity inheres in material things: it is only with an understanding of this necessity that the technologist can manipulate these things for the material benefit of human beings. Because the strictest necessity inheres in material things, the doctrine of materialism seems to be a doctrine of strict determinism. But the strict necessity inherent in material things can in no way be explained in simply material terms – the necessity is present in them only because they are governed by non-material principle. Without this, his materialism actually implies chaos, for the reasons I have just indicated. His materialism is actually inconsistent with his determinism, and consequently his materialistic-deterministic metaphysic fails.

---------- * ---------- * ----------

Eryximachus could try to solve the problem by simply abandoning his materialism, and explaining his cosmology in terms of non-material principle. If he could explain the order which technology presupposes in this way, then he could thereby explain the cosmic basis of technological power. He does not, however, make the attempt, and the reason why teaches us something about the political character of technology. People generally care about technology only to the extent that it serves their needs, first and foremost the material needs of their bodies. Eryximachus is primarily concerned in his speech to promote technology, and especially to promote himself as the prime technologist. He wants to argue for the supreme importance of art and especially medicine, and he implicitly bases his argument on the supreme importance of the material needs of the human body. But he also wants to argue that the rational basis of his *techne* is certain, for, as I have observed, such certainty is intrinsic to the appeal of *techne*. These two objectives are, however, in conflict. In order to argue the certainty of *techne*, he has somehow to argue the scientific basis of its power, which means he has to explain the nature of the strict necessity inherent in matter, which in turn means he has to argue that matter is moved in an ordered fashion by non-material principle. But here he runs into a problem, for if non-material principle is ultimately what accounts for cosmos, then the most important thing in the cosmos is this non-material principle, in which case the material requirements of the human body can no longer reasonably be seen to be of supreme importance. Reflection upon the principles of the cosmos has the tendency to make human life and concerns seem paltry by comparison. Of course, people have the most remarkable capacity to simply ignore whatever does not fit with their own, and they could still regard their own bodies as being of supreme importance even in the face of evidence to the contrary. But this would ultimately have the character of simple obstinacy if non-material principle is indeed the highest thing in the cosmos. The point is that an awareness of the supreme importance of non-material principle has the practical effect of undercutting intellectual support for what is one's own, starting with one's own material body.[141] So he is driven to downplay the significance of non-material principle. For if the material requirements of the human body can no longer reasonably be seen to be of supreme importance, then neither can a medicine (and art in general) whose purpose it is to minister to those needs. So he is caught in a bind. In short, he cannot simultaneously argue for the supreme importance of his art and adequately account for the basis of that art in the overarching order of things. Eryximachus fails to explain the order that is the precondition of his art because he is really much more concerned with arguing for the supreme importance of his art.[142]

We can express this tension in more overtly political terms. The political power base of *techne* is demotic. In order to be politically successful, technology must be both scientifically sound and popular. The latter requirement is in a sense more important, for if no one ever desired to see the doctor, he would have no political power. Eryximachus is, accordingly, more concerned with making medicine attractive to his natural constituency than he is with the scientific basis of medicine, and his account of that basis suffers accordingly.

---

[141] Aristophanes will develop the implications of this point in his eulogy.

[142] Which makes him a sophist. I have characterized Pausanius as a sophist, and it is interesting to compare the men in terms of their sophistry. Pausanius and Eryximachus are sophists with respect to different things: law and medicine. These two things are paradigmatic instantiations of convention or *nomos*, and art or *techne*. *Nomos* and *techne* are the two salient things that exist 'by man', as opposed to 'by nature'; they are the salient attributes of civilized man. *Nomos* and *techne* both have the effect (and in the case of *nomos*, probably the intention) of blocking man's direct access to nature, inasmuch as they mediate between man and nature. They come into being along with the city, and inhere in it, in the sense that the city cannot exist without them. *Nomoi* establish the practical architecture within which the people of a given regime live their daily lives; the division of labour implicit in a plurality of *technai* provides them a unifying interdependence. One wonders if perhaps Pausanius and Eryximachus are instantiations of two basic categories of sophist: the '*nomos* sophist' and the '*techne* sophist'.

One suspects that what Eryximachus really finds attractive about the art of medicine is the power that attends it.[143] The chaotic implications of the materialism he propounds actually support his desire for power, for once the view is accepted that the whole is chaotic, it is a short step to the view that such order as apparently exists obtains only through the imposition of man, or more precisely that special kind of man, the *powerful* artisan, the archetype of which is the doctor. In Eryximachus' account, the doctor *makes* the things which are most at enmity into friends, he *makes* them love one another, and it is only through this forced love and friendship that order obtains (186d). Order is imposed upon a recalcitrant nature by the artisan as demiurge, the artificer of the world. As the source of order in man's world, the artisan comes to view as the only real 'principle' of order that exists – he is, for all practical purposes, the god.[144] The purpose of nature is replaced by the purpose of the artisan.

Of course, if that were true, then the most important thing to understand would be the purpose of the artisan as demiurge, which would once again imply the need for psychology. At every turn, Eryximachus' argument points to the soul. But the artisan is not in fact free to create any order of his choosing. Because technological power assumes the natural order as the basis of the knowledge upon which it rests, the artisan in principle cannot do more than modify the existing natural order. The existing natural order is the precondition of his power in many ways, starting with the fact that the human being who practices the arts is himself an *ordered* being. The order, or – as Eryximachus would say – the health, of human beings was not created by the art of medicine; medicine is not coeval with humanity, but was rather *discovered* by humans (cf. *Republic*, 341e). Nature and not art created healthy humans. Nature decisively limits technological possibilities.[145]

---

[143] That is to say, he is not a doctor because he finds attractive the idea of making the sick healthy. He is not an artisan in the precise sense, as per Book I of *Republic*. There Socrates compels a very reluctant sophist, Thrasymachus, to agree that arts, "rule and are masters of that of which they are arts," and that the doctor, "insofar as he's a doctor, considers or commands not the doctor's advantage, but that of the sick[.]" The advantage of the sick is that their bodies be made healthy. A doctor in the precise sense is a ruler of sick bodies (*Republic*, 342b-d). But Eryximachus would not have his rule so limited. We can imagine Eryximachus, instead of Thrasymachus, in conversation with Socrates; Eryximachus would be every bit as reluctant to agree.

[144] We need not attribute to Eryximachus a conscious desire to be a god or demiurge in order to see that this is indeed the logical conclusion of his desire for power.

The demotic power base of the doctor and hence *techne* in general is indicated by the rhetorical appeal Eryximachus makes to the authority of the poets' Asklepios:

> Our ancestor Asklepios, who had the expert knowledge to instil love and unanimity into these things [*i.e.*, the opposite things of the body] – as the poets here assert and as I am convinced is so – put together our art.[146] (186e)

This appeal calls to mind Socrates' criticism of the poets' Asklepios in Book III of *Republic*. The poets' Asklepios had the supernatural power to raise men from the dead. His practice of medicine is always popular because it ministers to people's unreasonable desire to live forever. People will pay gold for this sort of medical practice – more than the gold of Midas if they had it – and this makes the doctor powerful among men. This seems fitting, for the power to raise men from the dead is god-like, and thus the power to stave off death is quasi-god-like. And indeed the poets teach that Asklepios was the son of Apollo (*Republic*, 408b-c). Socrates contrasts the poets' Asklepios with his own account of Asklepios. His Asklepios revealed an art of medicine intended for people who were basically healthy, but afflicted with some specific and finite malady, and which thus used short and unobtrusive therapeutic measures to cure them:

---

[145] It would be a strange nature that created humans who are capable, through art, of overcoming nature. The view that humans do indeed overcome nature in this way is not uncommon, and I would argue that the idea of technological progress is the main, if not the only, thing that makes credible the idea that humans have a significant and non-cyclical history, *i.e.*, the idea that we are historical rather than natural beings.

[146] The appeal to the poets and their Asklepios is striking because unmotivated, and logically it adds nothing to his account. He has just finished rendering his account of how the doctor creates health in the body. If his account is sound, what difference does it make how the founder of medicine practiced the art? Logically, none whatsoever, but to be persuasive, it is not sufficient that an argument make logical sense – it must also make psychological sense. This is in itself a statement on the inadequacy of his materialistic-deterministic metaphysic. For what is the difference between a rhetorically strong and a rhetorically weak argument? Is it a question of material strength? Whereas he can see the need to strengthen his argument rhetorically, he could not explain the need.

> His medicine is for these men and this condition [i.e., the basically healthy]; with drugs and cutting to drive out diseases, he prescribed their customary regimen so as not to harm the city's affairs. But with bodies diseased through and through, he made no attempt by regimens – drawing off a bit at one time, pouring in a bit at another [or, as Dr. Eryximachus would say, 'evacuations and repletions'] – to make a lengthy and bad life for a human being and have him produce offspring likely to be such as he; he didn't think he should care for the man who's not able to live in his established round, on the ground that he's of no profit to himself or to the city. (*Republic*, 407c-d)

The Socratic Asklepios would let die all those who could not be cured with short and simple therapeutic remedies, since extended therapy makes it impossible to live a life worth living. The Socratic Asklepios practiced a kind of medicine that could only appear harsh and uncaring to people, and which would thus hardly have the popular appeal of the poetic Asklepios' medicine.

Glaucon tells Socrates that he speaks of "a political [*politikón*] Asklepios" (*Republic*, 4407e). His assessment is accurate because the Socratic Asklepian medicine is directed to the good of the city and the good (as opposed to mere) life. The Socratic Asklepios was a doctor who understood the political significance of medicine, or the proper place of medicine within the city. He thus understood that the art of medicine is not itself able to rule human beings. Medicine is directed to the health of the body, but the human being is more than body. The purpose of the doctor *qua* doctor is to minister to the health of the body; the doctor *qua* doctor does not know anything of the purpose of a healthy body. Health is valuable only insofar as it is instrumental to the good of the city and the good life of the individual, neither of which is medicine the art. The art that comprehends these higher goods is the political art (*politikē*). The political art superintends the medical art. A doctor whose practice of medicine was actually guided by an awareness of these higher goods would be a political doctor (*politikós iatrós*). Eryximachus is not, and he is consequently unfit to rule.

According to Socrates, the 'current' medicine is "an education in disease", which did not come about "until Herodicus came on the scene", and which is thus incorrectly attributed by the poets to Asklepios. Herodicus was a sickly man who spent his whole life trying to cure himself, with no leisure for anything else, and so, "finding it hard to die, thanks to his wisdom, he came to an old age" (*Republic*, 406a-b). Herodicus was able, through his practice of medicine, to keep himself alive long after he should have died, thus proving that he had the skill that people value so highly. None of this is, however, particularly beautiful or noble, and it takes a poet to make it seem so. Eryximachus is dependent on the authority of the poets because only they can provide any sort of 'justification' for the concern with health apart from a concern with its proper use, or for the concern with mere life apart from the good life, i.e., they and only they can make what is not actually noble or beautiful seem so. With their Asklepios, the poets effectively make the unreasonable desire to live forever seem beautiful and noble. In so doing, they support the power of a sickly man like Herodicus because he, like the poetic Asklepios, ministers to this unreasonable desire.

Eryximachus is like Herodicus: a doctor concerned with mere life apart from good life. The idea that the highest human good is mere existence is not at all humanly satisfying; Eryximachus' materialistic-deterministic metaphysic actually implies the meaninglessness of human life. Though he does not explicitly say so, Eryximachus really thinks he can solve this problem with pleasure. His basic assumption, though never explicitly stated, is that the good life is the pleasant life – or, at least, the pain-free life – and he clearly offers to minimize pain and maximize pleasure with technology. But he has no way of explaining how the painless or pleasant life differs from, or why it is preferable to, mere life. The preoccupation with pain and pleasure is practically inseparable from a preoccupation with mere life, which is, as I have noted above, inconsistent with a concern for the good life. This creates a problem for Eryximachus in that the human potential for the good life is essential to distinguishing human life from that of other herd animals, such as cows. He understands all in terms of body, and there is no *essential* difference between human and bovine bodies – at any rate, not as he understands them: the highest good of each body, taken by itself, is health, and to be healthy, each must at a minimum consume certain nutrients, eliminate waste, and maintain some sort of internal equilibrium. This is equally true of the things that grow in the earth. His materialistic-deterministic metaphysic has a levelling effect, inasmuch as there is nothing in it to distinguish the *value* of different kinds of life. It thus supports the democratic law of equality, and this again speaks to the issue of why the natural political power base of *techne* is demotic.

Actually, the levelling effect of Eryximachus' materialistic-deterministic metaphysic goes even further than this. He tells us that astronomy is akin to medicine, because both simply refer to a physical subject matter in motion: just as medicine understands eros as the motions of the human body (186b-c), so too astronomy understands eros as the motions of the celestial spheres (which in turn give rise to the seasons of the year, 188a-b). The motions of both can potentially be understood in terms of constant principles of motion that are rationally identifiable through art. The implication is that there is no essential difference between the elliptical motion of the moon around the earth and the purposeful purpose-filled motion of the human being from birth to death. But then the human body is not essentially different from the heavenly spheres – or rocks, or dirt, or any other simply physical thing that exists, all of which are lifeless. In providing his unified account of all things, he in fact obliterates what would seem to be the most fundamental distinction of all: that some things are alive and some are not. This is a mistake, for there is surely an important qualitative difference between the teleological motion of all living things through life and the endlessly repetitive motion of the moon around the earth. The difference between teleological and repetitive motion would seem to be precisely that the former motion is erotic and the latter is unerotic. If so, the implication is that the distinction between the living and the non-living is equivalent to the distinction between erotic and unerotic motion. It could be the case that, just as the soul is the source of animation, eros is the energizer of the soul.

The radical distinction between the living and the non-living might seem to create an absolute dichotomy in the cosmos, two radically different modes of being between which there is a huge and yawning gap. But, as we know, they are nonetheless in constant communication with each other. The most obvious and perhaps most important aspect of this communication is the continual living process of ingesting nutrients.

Now it turns out that this is a complicated process, and complicated in more than simply medical terms. For while this process supports life, the things that we ingest are conducive not only to our health but to our pleasure as well. This dual purpose of human ingestion speaks to a dichotomy in human nature, which Eryximachus evidently views as critically important to the practice of medicine. We see this clearly when he elaborates on the actual practice of medicine as he understands it:

> And this love [i.e., the love of the ordered or healthy] is the noble one, the Uranian, the Eros of the Uranian muse. But the pandemian [love] is Polyhymnia's [many-songed, or many-tuned], which must, whenever it is applied, be applied cautiously, in order that it might harvest its own pleasure but not instil any intemperance – just as in our art it is a large order to employ in a fair way the desires that cluster around the art of making delicacies so as to harvest their pleasure without illness. (187d-e)

The Uranian love is for Eryximachus the healthy love, and the pandemian love is the sickly or unhealthy love, which he associates with the pleasures. Pleasures can lead, he says, to intemperance and illness, both of which are clearly undesirable. Yet we desire pleasures nonetheless. If Eryximachus were a simple doctor, he would not be interested in helping us to 'harvest' any pleasures that can lead to illness, because, as a simple doctor, he would be wholly dedicated to health. But he is *not* a simple doctor, and so he does not simply use the power of his art for bringing people's bodies to health. Rather, he uses it to minister to people's desires for pleasure without causing too many 'ill effects'. His practice of medicine works like this: indulgence in pleasures often makes people unhealthy, and he supposedly has the power by art either to forestall this consequence, or to make them healthy again if they have become ill through indulgence in pleasures – people can go on and on indulging in *un*healthy pleasures as long as his art can restore them to health (cf. *Republic*, 426a-b). Whatever technological power he may have to use in the service of health, he actually offers for use in the service of pleasure. In his hands, the practical meaning of medicine is nothing more than this: it is that art by which we are made aware of how much pleasure we can enjoy without harming ourselves and experiencing pain. The doctor provides the technical support that facilitates the enjoyment of pleasure. Plato seems to teach that the practical consequence of the technological turn from nature is an unqualified hedonism.

Health remains the standard for medicine as Eryximachus practices it, but only in what would seem to be a thoroughly perverted way: health is the precondition for the enjoyment of pleasures, and it provides a kind of 'floor' beneath which the enjoyment of the pleasures cannot slink. *"Drunkenness is a hard thing for human beings"*, he says, *and I advise you not to drink – it's unhealthy. Especially don't drink if you were drunk yesterday* (176d). *But if you like to drink, then OK, go ahead. Just not too much all at once. Just try to keep it under control, alright? If you go overboard, though, come and see me – I can probably give you something that'll help.*[147] There is with Eryximachus an inversion of what would seem to be the natural hierarchy as regards health and pleasure, and it amounts to a crass prostitution of his art. It is at any rate an inversion of the natural hierarchy as the doctor *qua* doctor understands it, and as is evident, for example, in the Hippocratic Oath, to which, as a self-avowed Asclepiad (186e), Eryximachus would have sworn.[148] The first thing in the Oath as regards the medical treatment of the sick is: "I will apply dietetic measures for the benefit of the sick according to my ability and judgment".[149] The doctor uses dietetic measures for the benefit of the sick, i.e., their purpose is to promote health.[150] These measures were in ancient times "the main staple of the physician's therapeutic offerings",[151] and encompassed a wide variety of food, drink and drugs. Generally speaking, 'dietetic measures' referred to the therapeutic application of anything ingestible for the benefit of the sick, including, for example, the 'delicacies' of which Eryximachus speaks above. Hence, it should be noted, that when Eryximachus talks about employing, "in a fair way the desires that cluster around the art of making delicacies", it would sound to an ancient ear like a much less bizarre thing for a doctor to say than it does to a modern one; it would likely sound like unremarkable medical therapy to his listeners. There are indeed proper medical uses of delicacies. For example, the doctor can use pleasant tasting foods by mixing them with the nourishment which is actually needed by the body in order to make the sick want what they actually need (cf. *Laws*, 559e-a).[152] But the doctor's use of delicacies, if it is to be proper medical use, ultimately must be primarily for the sake of health, not pleasure.

---

[147] Hence, he advises the kind of moderation that is born of a concern for health, or, more accurately, a concern for avoiding too much ill health. It is in any event not the kind of moderation that is born of a concern for virtue.

[148] One of the striking things about Eryximachus' speech, once it is noticed, is the complete absence in it of any of the spirit that animates the Oath.

[149] As quoted in Leon Kass *Toward a More Natural Science* 231.

[150] Hence, incidentally, we can see why it might be natural for a doctor to think of the internal harmony of the body – what Eryximachus calls healthy love – and so too of harmony in general, as a condition of 'like to like':

> What, after all, is diet or nutrition? It is the steady provision of necessary materials steadily consumed for energy or transformed from other to same by the body in metabolism, by which the body maintains in organized equilibrium its own functioning integrity. *Ibid* 232.

[151] *Ibid.*

Socrates discusses in some detail the relationship between medicine and the art of making delicacies, and thus implicitly between health and pleasure, in Plato's *Gorgias*, and it is useful to consider this discussion as it bears on Eryximachus' eulogy. Socrates states categorically there that what Eryximachus refers to as "the art of making delicacies" is indeed *not* an art, but rather a 'knack' based on experience, and it has as its chief point 'flattery' (463a-b).[153] It is the particular form of flattery that, as Socrates says, "slipped in under" medicine:

> So cookery ["the art of making delicacies" is a specific kind of cookery] has slipped in under medicine and pretends to know the best foods for the body, so that, if the cook and the doctor had to contest among children or among men as thoughtless as children which of the two, the doctor or the cook, has understanding about useful and bad foods, the doctor would die of hunger. (464d)

Calling cookery a form of flattery of course casts it in a pejorative light. But if there is a proper medical use of cookery, as indeed it seems clear that there is, then this presentation must be somewhat misleading. The presentation is misleading because the rhetorical situation in which Socrates finds himself in *Gorgias* causes him to give an incomplete account of cookery, or more generally, an incomplete account of flattery. It is only possible to maintain both that cookery has a legitimate supplemental role to play to the art of medicine *and* that it is a form of flattery if there is a legitimate role for flattery in medicine. Flattery is important because it appeals to that aspect of our nature that wants what is pleasant. The successful doctor has to deal with the whole human being, he has to recognize and work with the natural human preference for pleasure. Because of this aspect of human nature, the doctor must to some extent be a flatterer; he must concern himself with the pleasure of his patients (and not just with the avoidance of pain). But it is not clear to what extent he must do this; he cannot simply take his bearings on this problem from the art of medicine, for flattery is by experience and not by art. He has to take his bearings largely from his familiarity with his patients, which is naturally apt to draw him into an excessive concern for their pleasure. This is especially true to the extent that his patients are unreasonable, or "thoughtless as children," and so apt to resent him for any unpleasantness he may cause them. The more he concerns himself with their pleasure, the less his art guides his relations with them. At the extreme, he becomes wholly dedicated to their pleasure, and uses the technological power of his art to serve their pleasure rather than for its proper or defining purpose. This is the state into which Eryximachus has worked himself. Cookery, which Socrates says "slipped in under" medicine, is for him no longer superintended by medicine – it has somehow 'slipped over'. Cookery becomes more important for him than it should be because pleasure is more important for him than it should be. He is, in effect, more cook than doctor. But he will not die of hunger, for there is a good living to be made pandering to people as thoughtless as children.

---

[152] 'A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down.'

[153] Flattery in its primary meaning refers to that which pleases the senses. It is always connected to pleasure of some sort.

Socrates says cookery is shameful, "because it guesses at the pleasant without the best." It cannot be called an art because it cannot give a reasoned account of itself (*Gorgias*, 465a). Supposedly, this is because there is no genuine knowledge to be had of how to please people. The ability to please "is not artful but belongs to a soul that is skilled at guessing, courageous, and terribly clever by nature at associating with human beings" (*Gorgias*, 463a). This can be explained as follows: one cannot know, but only guess at, what pleases people because, whereas there is one single comprehensive form of health, there is no single comprehensive form of pleasure to be known. For this reason, the pleasure of an individual is, unlike the health of an individual, inherently nebulous. There is no rational account to be given of, for example, whether yoghurt or ice cream contributes more to an individual's pleasure, but there is a rational account to be given of whether yoghurt or ice cream contributes more to an individual's health. But Eryximachus, in essence, tells people that there is a rational account to be given of their pleasure, and that, on the basis of this, he can manage it for them.

This makes his *techne* attractive to people because it is in the nature of human beings to want both health and pleasure. The doctor's proper medical use of pleasant tasting foods – as an inducement to ingesting nourishing foods – works precisely because we naturally want pleasure; and the very fact that we go of our own free will and volition to see doctors whenever we think we might be sick (which can indeed be an altogether *un*pleasant experience) attests to the fact that we naturally want health as well.[154] But these wants can be, and for most people typically are, in competition and disharmonious tension with each other, so that people are themselves 'many-tuned'. Nature creates a problem for us in that she endows us with typically conflicting wants that leave us divided against ourselves. One might suppose that the problem could be resolved successfully by simply 'picking' one at the expense of the other, in accordance with the natural hierarchy of health and pleasure, perhaps reasoning as follows: health is more valuable for human beings than is pleasure, as some minimal level of health seems to be a practical prerequisite for the enjoyment of virtually all that is enjoyable in life. But this solution is inadequate. A life that was simply dedicated to health would not be complete. Neither would one devoid of all pleasure.[155] If health and pleasure are indeed natural, then, assuming nature makes nothing in vain (Aristotle *Politics* 1253a8-a10; Aristotle *Physics*198b16-199b32), both have a necessary role to play in the total economy of human life.

---

[154] Which means that we want to avoid pain, but also to live.

[155] The Athenian Stranger in Plato's *Laws* argues that the pleasures must indeed be embraced. However, it seems this is not so much because there is something intrinsically worthwhile about them, as because they cannot be ignored. They are natural in the sense that every man will inevitably be exposed to pleasures, and will desire at least some of them. He criticizes Cretan and Spartan laws for not requiring an adequate 'gymnastic' in pleasures that would 'inure' citizens to them. He finds this puzzling, because the Cretan and Spartan with whom he is conversing readily point to a number of provisions for inuring their citizens to pain. The reason this is puzzling is because a man is more blameworthy for giving in to pleasures than to pains. A man who gives in to pleasures is said to be blamably 'less than himself' (whereas a man who does not give in is said, in praise, to be 'greater than himself'). The laws, in effect, address the less and ignore the more blameworthy problem. The Athenian Stranger seems to argue that the pleasures need to be embraced only so that they can be overcome. He does not, however, provide any indication as to what the natural position of the pleasures is, or what role they properly play in the total economy of one's life, unless, of course, their purpose *is* to be overcome (*Laws*, 626d-e with 633e-635e). It bears mentioning that nowhere in Eryximachus' account is there any sense of personal 'overcoming'. He is not interested in creating men who are able resolutely to endure difficulties of all kinds, but only in making men comfortable with their weaknesses. As I have noted, there is a market for this sort of thing, which explains why he is able to make a living practicing medicine as he does.

To use Eryximachus' language, both the Uranian and pandemian loves, representing our natural desires for both health and pleasure, are part of a balanced, or ordered and harmonious, life; though he speaks of the Uranian as harmonious, it does not by itself constitute a perfect balance. The problem thus arises as to how to balance these two loves. Since nature 'created' the problem, it is certainly not clear that we can simply look to her for the solution; she is, at the very least, ambiguous. This ambiguity is part of what explains the success of doctors who practice medicine as does Eryximachus: he offers aid by trying to 'manage' the problem with *techne*. If we think about how the doctor would actually manage the relationship between the Uranian and pandemian loves so as to keep them in balance, we see that the practical problem he would confront would not likely be an 'excess' of the Uranian. We do not generally have to 'reign in' the desire for health because we want it more than pleasure. The real management problem is not Uranian indulgence, but rather pandemian indulgence.

Reflecting upon the relationship between the pandemian and Uranian offers insight into the nature of the only animal that has experience of both the pandemian and Uranian: man. For every animal except man, what is pleasant generally conduces to its good: health (at least when living in their natural state). This is because the human animal is unique among all the animals in that it alone has a rational soul, which allows it self-consciously to enjoy the pleasures, and contrive ways to maximize them. Because of this rational soul, and the attendant element of freedom with which man is blessed, and without which the rational soul would be meaningless, man can *choose* to indulge in the pleasures to a greater or lesser extent. In particular, man can *choose* to indulge the pleasures to excess, and to the detriment of health.[156] An important source of sickness – perhaps even the most important – is the rational soul and its attendant free will (cf. *Republic* 408e).

---------- * ---------- * ----------

---

[156] And when we do so, we blame ourselves or feel contempt for our weakness (cf., *Republic*, 440a-b). But since we obviously cannot blame ourselves with the part of ourselves that indulged the pleasures in the first place, we must blame with a different part. An awareness of the problem created by the conflict between the Uranian and pandemian forces upon us an awareness of the soul, and in particular, that the soul has parts. This is very hard to understand apart from something like Plato's tripartite division of soul (*Republic*, 437b-441c).

Human beings naturally tend towards health, but they can make choices that tend towards sickness. The double eros pertains to humans and not to animals for this reason. The situation is similar in the case of music: in the simple music, the double eros is not yet present, but when it is applied to human beings in what is called lyric poetry and education, it becomes difficult, and the double eros emerges. It seems as though the double eros (i.e., in its capacity as 'two' rather than 'one') is only relevant to human beings; the double eros emerges in response to the complexity of human beings. Eryximachus' cosmology thus actually gives a special place to human beings, which was not his ostensible intention. He wanted to explain the unity of all things in terms of matter in motion, which implies that there is nothing different or special about human beings, inasmuch as they are ultimately governed by the same natural principles that govern all other matter. Yet nonetheless, he ends up giving what amounts to an anthropocentric account of the double eros. For example, the composition of the seasons of the year

> is also full of both these Erotes; and whenever the hot and the cold, and the dry and the moist, which I mentioned before by chance obtain ordered love for each other and accept a moderate harmony and mixture, they come bearing good seasonableness and health to human beings and to the rest of the animals and plants and commit no injustice. But… [188a]

If the seasons are ruled by the Uranian love, then they bring good things *to human beings*. But… if not, then all sorts of bad things happen: plagues and storms and frosts and so on. The seasons of the year are, however, themselves 'indifferent' to these things. Human beings on the other hand are not so indifferent. It is clear that it is only because of their adverse consequences *for human beings* that they are in any sense problematic and subject to adverse assessments.[157] The implication is that the double Eros is 'present' in the nonhuman things only because these things have meaning for human life and well-being. If there were no humanity, there would be no 'double eros', since there would be no divergent assessments of natural phenomena.

The main attraction of art is that it gives us the power to control the things that affect our life and well-being. Yet we in fact have no control over many of these things.

---

[157] Cf. Bloom *Love and Friendship* 474-75.

The plagues and storms and frosts and so on that he speaks of are a reminder of the limitations of the power of art. Eryximachus in the end has to admit that art is ultimately powerless to guarantee human life and well-being. Whether or not the composition of the seasons of the year is governed by the right Eros, the one that brings good things *for us*, is ultimately a matter of chance. This realization undercuts the basic thrust of his whole argument. What he needs to make this situation more palatable is some agent powerful enough to exercise choice with regard to these things, in much the same way that humans can exercise choice with regards to their bodies. This is why he extends his analysis to the divine. A god chooses, and this explains bad weather. Since the god has such a great impact on human life and well-being, we need an art that can ensure that the god chooses in ways which work to our benefit. This is divination, the art that rules over sacrifices, or more generally, over the communing of gods and human beings, and "has expert knowledge of human erotics, as far as erotics has to do with sacred law and piety" (188d). This is a sham art, based on imaginary things, but he needs it rhetorically in order to avoid the conclusion that art per se is ultimately powerless against nature. In the end, he takes an unjustified leap of faith and simply hopes for the best. The atheistic man of science turns out to be oddly dependent on god.

7 Aristophanes

These were the things which at that time caused many varieties of atheism and other disgusting views to infect such men; and indeed the poets took to reviling, and compared those who philosophise to dogs using vain howlings, and said other mindless things.

(Laws *967c-d)*

It is (belatedly) Aristophanes' turn to eulogize eros. Eryximachus has spoken in place of the comic poet while he was hiccoughing, but apparently now his hiccoughs have stopped, and he can speak. But the first thing that he says is that it took the most extreme treatment prescribed in order to bring them under control, which causes him to wonder at the "orderliness [*cosmion*] of the body desiring such noises and garglings as a sneeze is; for my hiccoughing stopped right away as soon as I applied the sneeze to it" (189a). The orderliness of the body reminds us of the orderliness of the whole, especially given that Eryximachus has just finished trying to propound a cosmology in terms of body. For Eryximachus, the human body is the microcosm within which the entire cosmos is reproduced. Aristophanes' quip, however, makes the order of the body appear quite ridiculous; it calls into question the credibility of the cosmology based on body. The quip is intended to draw a laugh, and it does, which fact further calls into question the credibility of Eryximachus' cosmology, for it is difficult to see how humour could be explained in physical terms. The provoking of laughter – unlike sneezing – would seem to be primarily, if not exclusively, a psychic phenomenon. Aristophanes has the power to produce laughter more or less at will, and this is a power for which the cosmology of Eryximachus is not able to account.

So he tries to suppress it:

> My good Aristophanes, look at what you are doing [or making, which is the word for poetry; *poieîs*]. You have made us laugh [*gelötopoieîs*] just as you were about to speak; and you compel me to become a guardian of your own speech, lest you ever say anything laughable [*geloîon*] – though you did have the chance to speak in peace. (189a-b)

The laughter has come at Eryximachus' expense, and he counterattacks with grace. A 'laugh-maker' is more often than not a buffoon[158] – and so it is usually translated.

---

[158] This is, at any rate, the general impression created by the use of the word 'laugh-maker' in the Platonic corpus. It occurs only five times, once here and four times in

Eryximachus implies Aristophanes is a buffoon about to embark on a foolish speech in this assembly of gentlemen, and that he, Eryximachus, the leader of the assembly, is therefore compelled to keep him in line. The counterattack is gracious because accusing a comic of buffoonery hardly seems harsh, and even though 'laugh-making' would seem to be Aristophanes' stock in trade, and is thus to be expected of him, there are times when it is entirely appropriate to ask the comedian to be serious (cf. *Republic*, 452c).

The last words of Eryximachus quoted above remind us that Aristophanes actually wrote a play called *Peace* – he really has had a chance to speak in peace.[159] In this subtle way, Plato draws our attention to the fact that Aristophanes is an accomplished comic poet, immediately before he begins his eulogy to eros. Eleven of Aristophanes' plays are extant, including *Peace*. It is both necessary and just to read his speech with these plays in mind. One could say that the problem of the nature of the gods constitutes the central theme of these plays.[160] The Platonic Aristophanes also

---

Republic (The Perseus Digital Library, Gregory Crane, Editor-in-Chief, Tufts University, http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/vor?lookup=gelotwtopoie%Fw &advanced). The last use in *Republic* is in reference to the 'laugh-maker' Thersites (620c). He was certainly a buffoon, a man, "who knew within his head many words, but disorderly; vain, and without decency"; he was a man of "endless speech," who would say anything to amuse people, and who had a fittingly ugly appearance (*Iliad*, II 212 ff.). The problem with 'laugh-making' or 'buffoonery' is suggested by *Republic's* two central uses of the term: that 'laugh-making', together with giving our laughter free-rein, has a tendency to make us, in effect, more like Thersites (606c). The issue, however, is not so straight-forward. The first use of the term (452d), implicitly explains what it is about 'laugh-makers' that generally tends to make them contemptible buffoons like Thersites, but in so doing it also suggests a way in which 'laugh-makers' can be beneficial. I will discuss this first use in greater detail below.

[159] Aristophanes perhaps speaks most clearly in his own voice in *Peace*, for the hero of *Peace* is a thinly disguised version of Aristophanes. Moreover, the central action of *Peace* is set in motion by the ascent to heaven of the hero on the back of a dung beetle (much as the central action of the present eulogy is set in motion by the the assent to heaven of the ugly round men). As Leo Strauss has observed: "No better emblem of the Aristophanean comedy could be imagined than a flight to heaven of the thinly disguised poet on the back of a dung beetle." See *Socrates and Aristophanes* 39.

[160] Again quoting from Strauss:

> Given the reciprocity of nature and convention in regard to laughter [i.e., in Aristophanean comedy], this also means that theological explanations are the comic equivalents of natural explanations. One is thus led to consider whether comic equivalents par excellence or in the strictest sense occur at all outside the region within which *theologia* and *physiologia* diverge. From the point of view of the

reflects on the nature of the gods, though his explicit theme is eros. With only some exaggeration, one can connect these two themes by saying that for the Platonic Aristophanes, the gods explain eros, but also that eros explains the gods. If we consider what the Platonic Aristophanes says about the gods in light of what the Aristophanic plays say about the gods, then we begin to understand Plato's assessment of Aristophanes on this critically important issue. Of all the Aristophanic plays, *Peace* is perhaps especially pertinent to the present speech. The central action of each is set in motion by man's impious and hubristic ascent to heaven. And both prominently involve two different *types* or *kinds* of gods: specifically Greek gods and the heavenly spheres. But while in both there is a tension between the two types of gods, in *Peace* man is able to use the existence of the latter to improve his relation to the former and thereby improve his estate, whereas in the present speech the latter are of no avail. This contrast helps us to understand what Plato thinks about the gods.

Of all the Aristophanic plays, *Clouds* is the greatest. It is the play which, in the assessment of the poet himself, is his 'wisest', and the one upon which he lavished the most labour (*Clouds*, 520-524). *Clouds* constitutes a penetrating attack on Socrates, which – because Socrates is *the* philosopher – is an attack on philosophy per se. It could be said that the essence of Aristophanes' criticism of Socrates is that he is not really wise because he either does not sufficiently understand or is indifferent to the erotic basis and requirements of political life. To say this a bit more precisely, his activity is not consistent with the requirements of wholesome family life. He is strangely anerotic, and this fact is somehow connected to his study of the things in the heavens and below the

---

> Aristophanean Socrates the answer must be in the negative. The laughable is the defective of a certain kind. Given the variety of views as to what constitutes shortcomings, a man is most clearly laughable if he pretends to have an excellence while in fact he has only the corresponding defect, i.e., if he is laughable according to his own admitted standard. Hence pretense, affectation, or boasting become the preferred theme of comedy. Now if Zeus, who claims, or on whose behalf men claim, that he is the father of gods and men, that he is most powerful and wise, and that he deserves the highest veneration, does not even exist, as Aristophanes' Socrates indeed asserts, he is the greatest example of boasting that can be imagined. His case is the most perfect case of contrast between claim and being; he is the absolute subject of comedy; the comedy par excellence is the comedy of the gods. (*Ibid* p 143)

earth in apparent disregard of the specifically human things, which study undercuts those things. In particular, it undercuts the religiosity that supports family life. If Socrates is erotic at all, he would appear to be homoerotic: the inhabitants of the 'thinkery' are all men. Because the men of the 'thinkery' cannot produce sons, Socrates is compelled to steal the sons of other men in order to sustain it. From the view-point of the city, he takes what is most valuable and gives nothing of any value in return. But it is not just that he is parasitic, for the logical culmination of his philosophical activity is that he would destroy the city upon which he is so dependent. In making these criticisms, Aristophanes demonstrates that he understands what Socrates (as he portrays him) obviously does not sufficiently understand. *Clouds*, together with Aristophanes' other plays, shows that the poet *par excellence* is superior to the philosopher *par excellence* in respect of his understanding of the erotic basis of the city. This turns out to be of decisive importance, for without the city neither poetry nor philosophy can exist. The 'wisdom' of philosophy, if it does not apprehend the knowledge of how to protect and propagate itself, first of all by protecting its own environment, can only appear ridiculous, the farthest thing from wisdom.

The whole of the Platonic corpus can be understood as a kind of response to *Clouds* and the Aristophanic plays as a whole.[161] Certainly, the Socrates we meet in that corpus is much less open to the kind of criticism to which the Socrates of *Clouds* is open.[162] This response is most clearly evident at two particular points in the corpus: in the erotic dialogue *Symposium*, which is the only dialogue where Plato has Aristophanes make an appearance 'in person'; and in *Republic*, which provides an account of the basic rationale of the city, and which importantly includes in Book V a political comedy about the manipulation of the erotic basis of the city by Philosopher-Kings.[163] The comedy of Book V begins a much deeper and richer account of the city than had been provided in Books I - IV, one that for the first time tackles head-on the problems raised by the erotic basis of the city.[164] This would seem to imply that there are important truths, especially political truths, which – if they are radically to be considered – are best presented comically. If this is indeed the case, then it suggests a kind of essential kinship between Plato and Aristophanes, notwithstanding the fact of Aristophanes' attack on Socrates and philosophy.

---

[161] An ancient tradition has it that when Plato died, a copy of Aristophanes was found under his pillow (cf. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, aph. 28). The essential truth conveyed by this story is the utmost seriousness with which Plato took the great comic genius and especially his criticisms of the practice of Socratic philosophy.

[162] In the words of Leo Strauss:

> He [Plato's Socrates] is a man of the greatest practical wisdom, or at the very least of the greatest longing for it (*Phaedo*, 68e); he is the only truly political Athenian; he respects not only the fundamental requirements of the city but all her laws; he is the best of citizens and in particular a model soldier; he is the unrivaled master in judging human beings and in handling them, in knowing souls and in guiding them; he is the erotic man *par excellence* and a devotee of the Muses, especially of the highest Muse; he is of infinite patience with stupidity and of never-failing urbanity. (*Socrates and Aristophanes* 314)

---

[163] Allan Bloom explains the significance of Book V as a comedy and response to Aristophanes as follows:

> Book V is preposterous, and Socrates expects to be ridiculed. It provokes both laughter and rage in its contempt for convention and nature, in its wounding of all the dearest sensibilities of masculine pride and shame, the family, and statesmanship and the city. As such, it can only be understood as Socrates' response to his most dangerous accuser, Aristophanes, and his contest with him. In the *Ecclusiazusae* Aristophanes had attacked the public in the name of the private, and in the *Clouds* he had attacked philosophy in the name of poetry. Here Socrates suggests that, if philosophy rules, the political man can triumph over the private life. If he is right, he can show that Aristophanes did not understand the city because he did not understand philosophy, and he did not understand philosophy because he did not understand that philosophy could grasp the human things and particularly the city. The *Republic* is the first book of political philosophy, and attempts to show that philosophy can shed light on human things as no other discipline can. Socrates is the founder of the city in speech and, hence, of political philosophy. In Book V he tries to show the superiority of the philosopher to the comic poet in deed; he does so by producing a comedy which is more fantastic, more innovative, more comic, and more profound than any work of Aristophanes.... If the perfection of the city cannot comprehend the perfection of the soul, the city will look ugly in comparison to the soul's beauty and be a proper subject of comedy; its pretensions will be ludicrous. Such a comedy will be a divine comedy, one calling for a more divine laughter. Only philosophy could produce it, for, as Socrates will explain, only philosophy has the true standard of beauty. In appearing to disagree with Aristophanes about the city, Socrates shows that only he knows the true grounds of its inadequacy. Plato believes that his Socrates can argue better about man than Aristophanes, and that his arguments can culminate in better comedies. If this proves to be true, the total superiority of Socrates and his way of life will be manifest. (Allan Bloom "Interpretive Essay" in *The Republic of Plato* 380-81)

[164] The city in speech as initially developed in Book II is a collection of male artisans who come together for the economic rationale of efficiently satisfying the requirements of mere life. The city is then luxuriated, and the men are given things beyond what is needed for mere life. Socrates identifies the desire for more than what is required for mere life as the origin of war (*Republic*, 373e), and hence the need for warrior-guardians arises. But if the guardians are not to destroy their own city in addition to their enemies, they must be properly educated, for they will clearly be the most powerful group in the

Part of Plato's response to Aristophanes is to utilize comedy, and given the importance of comedy to philosophy, the comedy of Book V contains a substantial amount of commentary on the nature of comedy and the issues that surround it. An especially important example of this is the commentary it provides on the word meaning 'to make laugh' (*gelötopoieîs*), the word commented on above in connection with Eryximachus' counterattack on Aristophanes, a word that would seem to be key to understanding comedy. It first arises in the context of Socrates' discussion of the first

---

city, and will therefore not answer to any authority higher than themselves. Hence the dialogue turns to the music and gymnastic education in which these guardians will be reared. From among these guardians, the rulers are chosen in Book III on the basis of their demonstrated commitment to the *dogma* that one must do what is best for the city (*Republic*, 412e). The city thus founded has a tripartite class structure that proves to be the basis of *Republic's* initial account of justice (*Republic*, 432d-434c). But nowhere in all of this is the erotic character of the City in Speech explicitly addressed, and in particular the loaded question of how the citizens will be propagated (save for Socrates' observing *en passant* that, "the possession of women, marriage and procreation of children must as far as possible be arranged according to the proverb that friends have all things in common" *Republic*, 423e). It is only because of the erotic character of Polemarchus that the issue of the erotic character of the city in speech is forced on Socrates (449a-d), thus setting the whole argument about the City in Speech in motion, "from the beginning again as it were" (*Republic*, 450a). This new beginning, which is the comedy of Book V, calls into the question the adequacy of all that has preceded, and in particular the adequacy of the justice found in the city in speech. For with the introduction of women and children, the family is introduced, which can and does make powerful claims on the loyalty of the rulers, and which are not necessarily consistent with the claims of the city. To resolve this problem, Socrates will in effect do away with the family by introducing familial communism, which action is the basis of the comedy of Book V. Familial communism, and all that it entails, is politically impossible, and hence ridiculous as a serious political proposal. But because familial communism is strictly necessary for complete justice to obtain in the city, Socrates in effect teaches that the Just City, i.e., the perfectly just city, is an impossibility. The justice of the city is decisively limited by the necessary compromises with its erotic basis. The limitations of the city are presented comically. The comic presentation of the erotic basis of the city is deeper and richer than what has preceded it inasmuch as the limitations of the city are what place boundaries around it, or illuminate its nature (cf. Strauss *The City and Man* 138). To rephrase, the city is essentially defined in a comical fashion.

'wave' of Book V,[165] that of sexual equality. The guardians, both men and women, are to be used equally by the city, "except that we use the females as weaker and the males as stronger" (451d-e). If this is so, then they must be given the same education in music and gymnastic. But the gymnastic education, involving as it does the training of the body, will create some apparently ridiculous sights if indeed men and women are to be educated in common, such as the sight of men and women – and not just young ones – exercising naked together. Socrates observes, however, in defence of the common education of men and women, that people likewise used to think men exercising naked together was ridiculous, even though now it is common practice in Greece, and no one laughs at it anymore. This is because the practice of exercising naked as developed by the Cretans and Lacedaemonians somehow came to be understood as better:

> But, I suppose, when it became clear to those who used these practices that to uncover all such things is better than to hide them, then what was ridiculous to the eyes disappeared in the light of what's best as revealed in speeches. And this showed that he is empty who believes anything laughable [*geloion*] other than the bad, or who tries to 'make-laughter' [*gelötopoiein*] looking to anything as laughable other than the foolish and the bad, or again, he who looks seriously to any standard of beauty he sets up other than the good. (*Republic*, 452d-e)

If it could be made clear through speeches that it is best for men *and women* to exercise naked together, then anyone who tried to make a joke out of this would indeed be empty – a buffoon. Setting aside the issue of whether or not such arguments can actually be made, it follows from what Socrates says here that anyone who tries to 'make-laughter' looking to what *really is* foolish and bad may *not* be empty. Socrates implicitly establishes a standard against which to judge all comedy, for even upon reflection, some things really are worthy of laughter (being foolish and/or bad), and a comedian who makes us laugh at them is fully justified in doing so. Such a comedian's work could rightly be called 'high' comedy, or some such thing.

The Aristophanic plays and the Aristophanes of *Symposium* can be judged against this standard. When Eryximachus rebukes Aristophanes' by pointing to his

---

[165] Once the erotic character of the city in speech becomes the explicit theme of discussion at the insistence of Polemarchus and Adeimantus and the others, Socrates cautions that the *logos* has turned into dangerous or rough waters, and that there are in particular three 'waves' of argument which threaten to drown them: the possibility and the beneficialness of sexual equality, familial communism, and philosophical rule in the city (cf. 453d with 457b-d and 473c-e).

'laugh-making' and implicitly accusing him of buffoonery, the gambit fails, ultimately because not all 'laugh-makers' are buffoons. A good comedian can be serious even while plying his trade. The laugh that Aristophanes' quip about the sneeze raises at Eryximachus' expense has a serious side. The whole hiccoughing episode is in effect a kind of summary statement on Eryximachus' speech. The comedy of the hiccoughing episode is heightened because it presents the body in isolation,[166] which is precisely what Eryximachus did in his speech, i.e., he attempted to explain human eros by abstracting body from soul; he attempted to explain the human in terms of body. But if, as I argued above, a careful consideration of his speech actually shows that it points to the soul as what rules body, and as the very thing by which we live, then it is a foolish speech, for Eryximachus does not understand the implications of his own argument. And it is a bad speech for all those who do not consider it carefully enough, or who do not see that it actually points to the soul as what rules body, for the effect of Eryximachus' bodily presentation of eros is to encourage them to neglect what is most important: their souls. It is thus a foolish and bad speech, and as such ridiculous, and truly worthy of laughter. Aristophanes' gambit may seem to many as but so much slap-stick comedy – which, as mere 'bodily humour', it is – but it is also more than that. In Aristophanes' hands, slap-stick is a bridge to a higher comedy, to what is truly laughable. He uses the low to get to the high, which means that he touches everyone in his audience. It is a remarkable feature of Aristophanes' comedy that it is able to reach both the wise and the unwise, for both end up laughing together at the same ridiculous thing, even if not wholly for the same reasons.

---

[166] The purpose of the doctor's remedy is stop the hiccoughs, which were ostensibly preventing Aristophanes from proceeding with his *logos*. This is the way medicine *should* work: by manipulating bodily motions so as to facilitate the operation of beneficial psychic motions. Seen in light of that purpose, there is nothing very funny about applying the sneeze to the body. But Aristophanes' quip divorces the sneeze from its rational purpose, and considers it only in light of the body. This renders it ridiculous, for if the soul in fact rules the body, then the body is of no great importance in comparison to the soul (cf. *Republic*, 445a-b), and the needs of the body can only be regarded as of any importance at all to the extent that they conduce to the needs of the soul (cf. *Republic*, 591b-d). The body abstracted from the soul is thus a paltry and ridiculous thing, and hence a natural subject of comedy. We all somehow divine the truth of this, which is what explains the popular appeal of Aristophanes' bodily humour.

The reason why it is Eryximachus who attempts to reign in Aristophanes is that he is the ruler, the one who, as I have observed above, established the *nomos* of *Symposium*.[167] As the lawgiver of the dialogue, he is the dialogue's representative of the city. The city, or at any rate the city which is not properly ruled (i.e., the city which is not ruled by wisdom) is always somewhat ridiculous because the *nomos* of the city will always treat the needs of the body as of greater importance than they really are. The *nomos* of *Symposium* is that the *logoi* of *Symposium* should be ordered on the basis of the relative position of the bodies which contain the souls that make the *logoi*.[168] This may be a convenient arrangement, but it is arbitrary in view of its dependence on body: a different arrangement of bodies would produce a different order of *logoi*. The *nomos* is rationally defensible to the extent that the convenient is rationally defensible, but no further. This has the effect of making the *nomos* faintly ridiculous. All *nomos* is faintly ridiculous because all *nomos* governs embodied souls, i.e., all *nomos* is ultimately traceable to the physical, and hence somewhat arbitrary, arrangement of people. Accordingly, the wholehearted dedication to the preservation of the *nomos* is faintly ridiculous. Hence the rulers, whose job it is to preserve and defend the *nomos*, can always be made to appear faintly ridiculous. The same can be said of the city itself. The one who makes the city appear faintly ridiculous is the comic poet. The whole of the interaction between Eryximachus and Aristophanes encapsulates the interaction between city and comic poet.

I have commented above on how this interaction demonstrates the manner in which the comic poet attacks the ruler and subverts the *nomos*, as well as why this poetical attack is so effective.[169] But why does the city apparently have no remedy? Eryximachus essentially says to Aristophanes:[170] *You make us laugh just as you are about to speak – I know what you are doing. I'm on to you, so take care lest you say anything laughable and I have to censor you.* This turns out to be an idle threat.

---

[167] See pp. 36-37 above.

[168] Though it should be noted that Plato has, of course, imposed this order of bodies in accord with his order of *logos*.

[169] See pp. 106-108 above.

[170] I.e., in the above quote of him, p. 146.

Aristophanes simply responds that he doesn't need a censor because he intends to speak differently:

> You have made a good point, Eryximachus, and please let what has been said be as if it were never spoken. But do not be my guardian, for in what is about to be said, I am not afraid to say laughable things – for that would be a gain and native to our Muse – but only things that are thoroughly ridiculous [*katagélasta*]. (189b)

In response to Eryximachus' threat to become a guardian[171] of Aristophanes' speech, i.e., to censor him, the comic poet says to the city: *Forget about what I've said in the past, and don't censor me - I'll speak differently now.* This is a manifestly facile response, to which Eryximachus in turn responds:

> You believe you can hit and run, Aristophanes, but pay attention and speak as though you are to render an account; perhaps, however, if I so resolve, I shall let you go.[172] (189b-c)

The city in effect tells the comic poet: *shape up, and conform more clearly to our* logos, *and then maybe we'll set you free*. The explanation for the limited power of the city *vis à vis* the comic poet is indicated by this statement. The city can only ask the poet to do better in the future, it cannot guarantee that he will. The city could only guarantee this if its threats were credible, but they are *ultimately* idle because the city cannot do without the poet. Poetry is integral to politics.[173] The city can of course eliminate this or that poet, or censor this or that piece of writing, but no city can eliminate poetry per se.

---

[171] This is the same word (*phúlaka*) as is used in *Republic* to refer to the class that rules the City in Speech. It is a word that Eryximachus uses fairly often, which again signifies his status here as the dialogue's representative of the city.

[172] Note the heavily political language here, which refers to the two key institutions of the democratic city: the law courts which are filled with people who "render an account," and the popular assembly which "resolves" this or that issue with sovereign authority.

[173] Plato indicates this in his *Republic* through the evolution of the City in Speech. Even in the very first city, the one which Glaucon derisively refers to as the city of pigs, wherein men live simple lives, content to share in the minimal fruits of each others' simple labours, there are *de facto* poets, for the men "sing of the gods", and someone had to make these songs (372b). And of course the first recognizably *human* city, the one that immediately follows the city of pigs, the luxuriated city, explicitly has poets (373b). Moreover, throughout the process of constructing the City in Speech, Socrates alludes to its need for the poet's *mythoi* (as for example with The Noble Lie, 414b-417b), which makes us doubt whether *any* city could actually exist apart from poetry. The city ruled by the Philosopher-Kings, at any rate, does not, for a certain kind of poetry – one which hymns to gods properly conceived and which celebrates good men – in the end remains within it (607a). As for the censorship and control of the poets, it is true that almost

This would seem to imply that poetry enjoys substantial freedom from the city. But in fact it does not. Aristophanes *must* make the people laugh, for his success as poet is dependent upon their laughter. Their laughter serves as a kind of ratification of the value of his poetry as comedy; and because people like to laugh, they will pay one who is able to make them laugh, which is what makes it possible for him to earn a living as a poet. But, in order to make them laugh, he has to appeal to *their* sense of humour. As we shall soon see, the comical *mythos* that Aristophanes will treat his fellow encomiasts to is an exploitation of the Greeks' understanding of their gods. Poets always work within the framework of a *given* understanding of what is noble and base, good and bad. Alternatively: the poet, as poet, is dependent upon politics. Because poetry is integral to politics, and politics to poetry, the freedom that the city offers the comic poet is illusory.

Plato's response to Aristophanes' attack on Socrates[174] and philosophy has much to do with this fact. Plato seems to concede to Aristophanes the point that poetry is indeed more secure within, and certainly better able to protect itself from, the city than is philosophy, for the dialogue clearly demonstrates that the comic poet can and does "hit and run". But, to draw on language from Plato's Allegory of the Cave, he can only hit and run within the confines of the Cave. The comic poet is like the human beings in the Cave who roam along behind the prisoners of the Cave, carrying artefacts (or, 'implements', 'furnishings'; *skeúē*) that cast shadows on the wall that the prisoners mistake for reality (*Republic*, 515b-a). These people may roam freely in the Cave, but ultimately they are no less prisoners of the Cave for that reason. The reason for the greater security of the comic poet *vis à vis* the city is *not* that he understands the erotic basis of the city better than does the philosopher, as the ensuing speech and Socrates' response to it will show, but rather that he is a part of the Cave in a way which the

---

immediately upon observing the luxuriated city's coming into being it is purified, and the need to control the poets and censor their *mythoi* is accepted, especially as regards their treatment of the gods (376e-383c). And it is true that the restrictions placed upon poetry become increasingly restrictive (386a-397e), to the point where anyone who was actually recognizable as a poet would be denied access to the city (398a-b). But we are given to wonder as to how effective such measures could really be, for by the time the city that is now coming into being is explicitly recognized as complete, there remain within it the gods of the Greek pantheon, which are the traditional or unreformed work of poets (427b-c).

[174] As outlined on pp. 148-149 above.

philosopher is not and can not be.[175] It is necessary to remember in this connection that whereas poetry would seem to be simply coeval with the city, philosophy is not. There was a time in the past when philosophy did not exist, and there may also be such a time in the future. In any event, in order for genuine philosophy to exist at all, it must somehow exist free from the city.[176] This is the basic truth that makes it vulnerable, for it means that it is never quite at home in the city – it is always foreign. But, Plato seems to imply, it is better to exist free and vulnerable as a philosopher than confined and secure as a comic poet.

---------- * ---------- * ----------

---

[175] I have observed that in Aristophanes' hands, slap-stick is a bridge to a higher comedy, to what is truly laughable, or that he uses the low to get to the high. He is not necessarily thereby a philosopher. Exactly what he is only becomes clear upon having examined his eulogy to eros. In crafting this, Plato provides a statement on how Aristophanes relates to both city and philosophy.

[176] Philosophy can be understood as the effort to exchange opinions for knowledge. In order to do this, one must be able to discern what really *is* from what merely *seems* or purports to be (*Republic* 476a-480a), which is represented poetically in *Republic* by the many passing shadows on the wall of the Cave. This ability could reasonably be said to be amongst the most vigorous of all powers (cf. *Republic* 477d). The shadows on the wall of the Cave can be understood as opinions, especially the authoritative opinions of the city as to what is good, just, beautiful, and so on. No matter how powerful one is, it is impossible to distinguish knowledge from opinion as long as these shadows remain authoritative. Philosophy thus stands or falls on its ability to be free from authority as authority.

This idea can and should be alternatively expressed in overtly erotic language, the language in which the philosopher is initially distinguished from the many (*Republic*, 474c-475c). The exchange of opinions for knowledge is not (as many people erroneously believe) exclusively – or, for that matter, even primarily – an exercise in mere intelligence. As the very word implies, philosophy is an *activity* of love. One who is not free from the city will be characterized by a multitude of often conflicting heterogeneous loves, loves which for the most part pertain to what is one's own, such as one's own self, possessions, honours, family, friends, and of course the city itself. Each love inevitably consumes a part of the flow of one's erotic energies (cf. *Republic*, 485d), and this makes it impossible to direct all one's erotic energies to the pursuit of wisdom. Yet philosophy demands nothing less, for the enormity of the task requires that no psychic strength be spared. The philosopher is and must be characterized by a most remarkable simplicity of soul, a simplicity born of the fact that a single and overpowering love rules his soul. For only in that case is it possible fanatically to direct all one's erotic energies to the single task of attaining wisdom. But it is impossible to do this and still remain tied to the city.

The beginning-proper of Aristophanes eulogy is his observation that human beings "have been entirely unaware of the power [*dúnamin*] of Eros" (189c). The first thing to know about eros is that it is powerful. Human beings have not understood the character of this power. In particular, they have not understood the power of eros to benefit human beings by making us *be* a certain way: happy. Aristophanes' eulogy will explain this. According to him:

> Eros is the most philanthropic [lit, 'most human-loving'; *philanthröpótatos*] of gods, a helper of human beings as well as a physician dealing with an illness the healing of which would result in the greatest happiness [*megístë eudaimonía*] for the human race. (189c-d)

Aristophanes is the first to make an explicit connection between eros and happiness.[177] We do not currently enjoy the greatest happiness because we suffer from a chronic illness. Humans as they currently exist are sick. They are thus in need of a doctor. The doctor practices medicine, which is the restorative art whereby the sick are returned to their natural state of health. There are quack doctors and true doctors, and they can be evaluated as such against the standard created by the natural state of health. How one understands doctors is thus a function of how one understands health. Eryximachus obviously understands it exclusively in terms of body, and this makes him a quack by Aristophanes' standard of health: happiness. Aristophanes and not Eryximachus is the true doctor – or, at least, the true diagnostician – because Aristophanes and not Eryximachus understands the requirements of happiness.

The key to understanding happiness lies in understanding the relationship between body and soul. As I argued above, Aristophanes' comic attack on Eryximachus succeeds to the extent it does in large part because it presents the body in isolation, as an end in itself, whereas the good of the body is important only to the extent that it conduces to the good of the soul.[178] The question of paramount importance for every individual is the good of their soul; Aristophanes insists upon this truth. He is thus a soul doctor. There is not, however, in Aristophanes a simple soul/body dichotomy. For he understands that we exist as *embodied* souls. Most, if not all, of Aristophanes' humour is ultimately traceable to this basic insight. Our existence as embodied souls is complex. The reason why Plato makes Aristophanes follow Eryximachus is that he supplies the insufficiency in Eryximachus' account, and to understand how and why this is, is at once to have understood something essential about the relationship between body and soul. Eryximachus understands health in a limited and circumscribed manner, in terms of body. People can believe this because they know from first hand experience how much of what they enjoy in life is tied to the body, and this makes it hard to imagine anyone happy who had a wretched or useless body. There is thus a natural tendency to confuse the physical requirements of health or happiness with the thing itself. Because Aristophanes does not make this mistake, he understands that health or happiness is primarily a question of soul rather than body. But because he also understands that the body plays an integral role in this, he still regards the body as integrally important. For Aristophanes, the good of the soul is not reducible to the good of the body, but rather encompasses it. For Eryximachus, however, there is nothing higher or more comprehensive than body, and the highest good for him is accordingly one which he thinks he can explain entirely in terms of body: pleasure.[179] This opinion of his is reflected by the fact that, as he practices medicine, health is really in the service of pleasure.[180] For Eryximachus, the good is pleasure. For Aristophanes, the good is happiness. The relation between body and soul is roughly analogous to the relation between pleasure and happiness. Whereas the pleasures, like the bodily desires, are practically related to some specific object, and hence their enjoyment is brief, happiness is a comprehensive and continuing state of well-being. And just as the good of the soul is not the same as the good of the body, but encompasses it, so too happiness is not the same as pleasure, but encompasses it: we can hardly regard a life bereft of pleasure as a happy one.

---

[177] Phaedrus and Eryximachus indicated that eros leads to happiness, but seemingly as an after-thought, or perhaps as a rhetorically effective way to finish their eulogies (180b and 188d). They did not provide any kind of rationale as to why there might be a connection between eros and happiness.

[178] See pp. 152-153 above.

Doctor Aristophanes is concerned with the comprehensive health of body and soul together. He will thus try to introduce his listeners to the power that eros has to make us happy, so that they can in turn teach (*didáskaloi*) it to everyone else. Aristophanes then teaches the teachers of mankind; he is a Great Teacher.[181] Since it seems that the power of eros can return us from sickness to our natural state of happiness, Aristophanes seems in effect to teach us the basis of our happiness. It seems as though the true doctor turns out to be a teacher; the true art of medicine is the art of education.

---

[179] But as *experienced*, pleasure is a phenomenon of *consciousness* (which he must, then, treat as either epiphenomenal or [somehow] 'material').

[180] See pp. 138-140 above.

Before he can introduce us to the power that eros has, Aristophanes has first to make us understand, "human nature [*anthröpínën phúsin*] and its afflictions [*pathémata*]" (189d). Aristophanes is the first to speak of specifically human nature. Eryximachus spoke of nature (186b), but nature for him was the nature of bodies; his account of nature was deficient because of his unselfconscious ignorance of specifically human nature. Accordingly, there was really no place in his cosmos for distinctly *human* beings. His speech was in a sense the opposite of Pausanius': it was all nature and no *nomos*, whereas Pausanius' was all *nomos* and no nature (to simplify matters for the sake of clarity).[182] They both misunderstand eros; Pausanius because he focused too narrowly on human beings, ignorant of the wider natural context within which human beings live (as if human nature shared nothing with the rest of the life world, and as if nature imposed no restraints on our ability to manage our erotic affairs with *nomos*), and Eryximachus because he focused too much on the wider natural context (as if *nomos* were simply irrelevant to our erotic natures). We might say that Aristophanes steers a middle course between these two extremes, focusing his own speech neither too narrowly nor too widely. It is a salient feature of Aristophanes' comedies that he ridicules nature from the perspective of *nomos* or convention, and that he ridicules convention from the perspective of nature. The question this raises, of course, is whether this leaves him any place to stand. Nature and convention are united in the problem of specifically human nature, for the need for *nomos* inheres in the nature of man. The Platonic Aristophanes provides an account of human nature as prefatory to his teaching on eros. Eros is not to be understood apart from some understanding of human nature.

---

[181] His poetry is primarily educative. It teaches a common way of life inasmuch as it utilizes what people already commonly regard as laughable (hence noble and base) in order to get laughs, and it (more importantly) teaches people what they *should* regard as laughable by making them laugh at it (hence it elevates the common way of life).

[182] Although, as I have also observed, this surface opposition overlays a more fundamental agreement between them that the good is pleasure.

In order to make us understand human nature as it now is, Aristophanes teaches us how it once was in some distant mythical past (189d). His account of human nature is grounded in a *mythos* and not a *logos*. Plato employs the mythic form not infrequently, and it is thus helpful to consider in general terms his use of it before embarking on a consideration of this particular *mythos*. *Mythos* can be distinguished by two broad features: it typically posits 'givens' which are not explained, and it treats of a subject matter which would be difficult if not impossible to account for with discursive reasoning alone. Typical themes of *mythos* include origins (of: the universe, order, life in general, human life in particular, various kinds of humans, the sexes, and the arts, to name a few examples), pre-life and after-life (where people get their due recompense), and the soul. To consider the last example in some detail, there are aspects of the soul which are familiar to us and yet virtually inexplicable, such as its being both a unity (barring some form of pathology, each of us is quite certain that we are indeed *one* person) *and* yet composed of different parts (which became evident in the above discussion of Eryximachus' speech).[183] A *logos* alone thus might not be sufficient for an adequate understanding of the soul.

The problem can be illustrated with recourse to the erotic dialogue *Phaedrus*, which is mainly given over to speeches about eros (230e-257b), and which is thus directly pertinent to the "whole activity" of Aristophanes (177e). *Phaedrus* provides an account of the soul that is based upon both a *logos* and a *mythos*. The *logos* turns on the notion that all soul is deathless, and its conclusion is that that which is moved by itself (and which is hence deathless) is the being (*ousia*) and rational account (*logos*) of the soul (245c-e). The overall *idea* of the soul is, however, presented with a *mythos*. Socrates explains that this mythical presentation is necessary because the *idea* of the soul is "altogether in every way a matter for a divine and long narration" (246a). An adequate *logos* of the idea of the soul, he suggests, is beyond the grasp of mere mortals. So he uses a *mythos* instead, the essence of which is that the soul is like "some naturally conjoined power of a winged team [i.e., of horses] and a charioteer" (246a-249d ff). It is not my purpose here to provide an in-depth analysis of this *mythos*, only to indicate what it shows us regarding the advantages of *mythos* over *logos*.[184] The charioteer in this *mythos* drives the team and the chariot, and rules the whole. The *mythos* indicates first of all that the soul has parts, since a ruling part is immediately distinguishable: the charioteer is like the part of the soul that decides upon the direction and motion of the soul, and issues commands accordingly. But as anyone who actually has some experience with horses knows, these commands are not simply obeyed; the horses obey more or less, depending on what sort of horses they are (cf. 246b with 253d-e). In fact, a wilful and unruly horse may ignore the commands altogether (cf. 254a), especially the commands of an unskilled charioteer, and end up effectively establishing both its own direction and motion and that of the charioteer. Now we could think about this *mythos*, and try to restate it as a *logos*. We could say, for example, that the charioteer is meant to be like the reason of the soul, and that the image shows that reason (properly) guides the soul. We could say that the horses are meant to be like the appetites or desires and the spirit, and that the *mythos* indicates that the soul is dysfunctional when they effectively rule. Drawing all the analogies and summarizing, we could say simply: the reason of the soul, when it is sufficiently competent, rules the appetites, desires, and spirit, and otherwise the soul is dysfunctional. And if we suspect that something like this was indeed the point all along, then we might well ask: why bother with making the *mythos* in the first place, and why would the *logos* alone not be sufficient? The answer is that what is lost in the translation from *mythos* to *logos* is the richness of the *mythos*. The *mythos* captures the complexity of the parts of the soul both in themselves and in their relation to the others in a way to which a *logos* would be unequal. Assuming, for the sake of argument, the interpretations of charioteer and horses given above, the *mythos* explains, for example, the *quality* of the rule of reason over desire. How could this be rendered with a *logos*? It could perhaps be described, but that would not convey the same meaning as does the relationship between charioteer and horses. Given that the rule of reason over emotions and desires is not simple or automatic, it is useful to liken it to types of rule drawn from experience that we know to be likewise not simple or automatic, and this is what *mythos* provides us with. Then, reflecting upon our own personal experience of trying rationally to rule over our sub-rational parts, we can assess the extent to which the *mythos* is actually true to that experience. Such self-reflective activity develops one's understanding of soul and especially one's own soul. As for the complexity of the parts of the image, it is sufficient to note that if the charioteer of the *mythos* is indeed like reason, then reason is remarkably complex, for the charioteer, as a man, has a soul, which is precisely what the entire image is meant to elucidate. This endows the image with a kind of reflexive quality, and it is hard to see how that could be rendered as well with a *logos*. And because of this, the *mythos* resists the rather 'mechanistic' simplifications of *logos*, as for example might occur when an analysis of soul leads us to 'locate' the badness of soul in one or several discrete parts of it. In sum, this *mythos* of *Phaedrus*, carefully considered, shows that a well-crafted *mythos* has important advantages over *logos* in terms of helping us "grasp in thought the truth" about the nature of anything of philosophical importance.

---

[183] See p. 143 above.

---

[184] The following draws heavily on the discussion of this image in Craig, n. 11, pp. 383-384.

If there are questions that can *only* be adequately considered in mythical form, then *mythos* is epistemologically legitimate, indeed even necessary. To rephrase, there may be a 'poetic reason' that is distinct from 'discursive reason', and which can communicate things that 'discursive reason' cannot. In reading Aristophanes' *mythos*, we should wonder whether it contains insights that could not be rendered with discursive reasoning alone.

This 'noetic' advantage is of course a separate issue from the rhetorical efficacy of *mythos*, which is primarily a function of its beauty. This distinction in turn obliges us to recognize the persuasive power of beauty, as opposed to the persuasive power of reason. The beauty of Aristophanes' *mythos* is created by the fact that the *mythos* somehow expresses the actual experience of men and women in love, i.e., there is a harmony between the experience and the *mythos* that is beautiful, and this harmony explains the rhetorical effectiveness of the *mythos*. That it is indeed rhetorically effective is evidenced by the fact of the ease with which it is remembered; once heard, anyone who has experienced love can never forget it. Notwithstanding the fact that Aristophanes' *mythos* is intended to be, and is, comical, and that the element of the comical is the ugly, his *mythos* is actually in a strange way beautiful.[185] The comic ugliness hides a deeper beauty that pervades the whole and becomes apparent upon sufficient reflection.

Socrates defines *mythoi* as stories that are, taken as a whole, false, but which nonetheless contain truths within them (*Republic* 377a). The philosophical challenge with any *mythos* is always to see the true in the false. We can expect the Platonic Aristophanes' *mythos* to be consistent with Socrates' definition. His *mythos* can be fairly, even if briefly, summarized as follows: that we were once whole, and that we were subsequently split, and that eros is the consequent longing to be whole again. If we can be reasonably certain that we were never whole and subsequently split, then the essential truth that his *mythos* conveys must be that eros is the longing to be whole. This is, at any rate, the experience the satisfaction of which his *mythos* captures so beautifully. If we consider this charming story we see that it is backwards derivative. In other words, Aristophanes begins with the experience of human eros, and he works backwards from that experience to generate the *mythos* that will account for it. One wonders if this is the process whereby all *mythoi* are created. If it is, it might seem to argue for the spuriousness of *mythos*, but the creative activity that produces the *mythos* is insightful as long as one remains true to the experience. For not any story will do; creating the stories that will actually lead to the experience is difficult work, and to see why one story and not another captures the experience is at once to have understood something about it. Moreover, this process allows one to explain the phenomenon without having recourse to anything alien to it, without explaining it in terms of something lower, as for example Eryximachus does, or in terms of something higher, as we shall see Socrates do.

According to the above definition of *mythoi*, the Platonic dialogues are themselves *mythoi*, for each Platonic dialogue, being radically fictitious,[186] is itself, taken as a whole, false, although it conveys important truths. But in order to learn from the dialogue, one must forget for the moment the fact of its falseness; one must accept the reality of the fiction in its totality, for this is the only way to become engrossed in the story, and this in turn is the only way to learn from it. Otherwise, it is too easy to dismiss elements of the story as simply charming details before their real significance has been adequately considered. Because every Platonic *mythos* reproduces the basic form of the dialogue within which it occurs, every *mythos* should be approached in the same spirit as the dialogue as a whole, for the skills that are involved in interpreting the *mythos* are the same as the skills involved in interpreting the dialogue as a whole.

---

[185] It is, at the very least, charming. Only one assessment of it is given from within the dialogue: that of Eryximachus, who calls it a 'pleasure'.

[186] See pp. 244-245 below.

---------- * ---------- * ----------

Aristophanes' *mythos* begins with an account of our ancestors. Instead of being divided into two (male and female), as we are now, our ancestors were divided into three tribes (or races; *génē*) of human beings. In addition to the male (*árren*) and female (*thēlu*) there was a tribe which in looks (or 'form'; *eîdos*) and name (*ónoma*) combined both. Its name – 'androgynous' (*andrógunon*) – still remains, even though the tribe to which it originally referred does not; the name now remains only as a term of reproach (189d-e). He calls attention to the name, which suggests that we too should give it some consideration. In fact, the third tribe does not combine the names 'male' and 'female'; rather, 'androgynous' (*andrógunon*) combines the names 'man' (*anēr*) and 'woman' (*gunē*). The name that actually combines the male and female is *arsenothēlus*. Aristophanes substitutes 'man' for 'male' and 'woman' for 'female' in order to arrive at his name for the third race. Given the attention that he has drawn to the issue of 'the name', the reader is surely meant to wonder about his purpose in doing this. To state the obvious, the male and female exist among all (higher) animals. There is one thing, and one thing only, that accounts for this division: the division of sexual labour. The male begets and the female bears. This is true of the human animal as well, but the male and female of this species are uniquely called by the names 'man' and 'woman'. 'Male' and 'female' are animal terms, whereas 'man' and 'woman' are distinctly human terms. That the human 'tribes' can be and are called by the names 'male' and 'female' as well as 'man' and 'woman' implies that, while we share something in common with the other animals, there is something unique about the human being. The mixing of animal and human names forces us to think about how the human is related to, but especially how it differs from, the other animals. Aristophanes is interested in the basis of the distinctly human.

Aristophanes says of the three original tribes that all had spherical bodies, but that "the male was in origin the offspring of the sun; the female of the earth; and the one that shared in both, of the moon, since the moon also shares in both" (190b).[187] Inasmuch as the sun denotes potency, it is natural to associate the male with it; likewise, inasmuch as the earth denotes fertility, it is natural to associate the female with it. But there is nothing in the story of our origin to shed any light on the nature of our sexuality. To know that the males of our species are descended form the sun really does not offer any insight into 'maleness' as such, and to know that the females of our species are descended form the earth really does not offer any insight into 'femaleness ' as such. For the terms 'male' and 'female' are evidently meaningless when applied to the globular beings – how then is it that they acquire their meaning after the 'splitting' of the globular beings (190d ff)? If we think about it, we see that this mythical account of our origins really does not explain anything about the sexes. This oddity is essentially connected to another one: the total absence of any discussion of our offspring. The two oddities are essentially connected for the following reason. The only conceivable reason for the division into male and female is, as I have said, the sexual division of labour; in ignoring the question of the male and female as such, Aristophanes ignores the sexual division of labour.[188] And as the purpose of the sexual division of labour is the generation of our offspring, he is driven to ignore our offspring as well. His mythical account of eros abstracts from eros in its *primary* sense and purpose because this *primary* sense and purpose is not human, or rather, it provides no basis for the distinctly human.

---

[187] It should be noted, incidentally, that – contrary to popular belief – this shows that educated Greeks regarded the earth as spherical.

[188] It is true that there is a passing mention of man generating in woman, so that the race can continue, which occurs after Zeus moves their genitals towards the front (191b-c). But this is every bit as uninsightful as the discussion of male and female. Actually, the significance of the movement of our genitals is not so much a question of the sexual division of labour as it is a psychological question. I will discuss this matter further below.

Perhaps, however, thinking about our origin in the sun and earth provides a basis for our humanity. It is, of course, true in some sense that we originate in the sun and earth: every living thing does. But of all the living things, only human beings have some conscious affinity for the heavenly spheres, for only human beings wonder about their relationship to them. Only human beings look up into the heavens, and wonder about the motions of the sun and the moon; only human beings are thus aware of the problem of the earth's place in the heavens, and so too of their own place in the cosmos. Aristophanes, who thought much about the human body, was surely aware that its unique form is especially well suited to support such wonder and awareness. Part of the reason why the human animal looks up and beyond is simply that its unique upright posture means that it easily *can*. There is then a kind of basis for the distinctly human in the distinctly human shape or form.[189]

But this physical form is not nearly so important an element of the distinctly human as is the psyche that goes with it. Our natural affinity for the heavenly spheres or contemplation of the cosmos tends to make us dissatisfied with our immediate environs and restless. The contemplation and questioning of the larger natural order leads naturally to a questioning of the narrower order within which we live, and this in turn leads to rebellion and hubris. This aspect of the human psyche is represented physically in this *mythos* by the ugly round bodies of our ancestors, and the effect of those bodies on their behaviour. This requires some explanation. Our ancestors had bodies that were, as a whole, round, like the heavenly spheres from which they originated. This likeness constitutes the physical representation of the natural psychic affinity that human beings have for the heavenly spheres. The mythical explanation for the roundish shape of our ancestors is that they were, in a sense, twice the human beings that we are. They had four arms, four legs, two faces set atop a cylindrical neck, two sets of genitals and so on. They could walk upright, as we do (but supposedly on all four legs), or they could stick out all eight limbs and tumble when they needed to move very quickly (funny to imagine). As might be expected, because they were twice the human beings we are, they were "awesome in their strength and robustness", and they had "great and proud thoughts". This led them to make war on the gods (189e-c).[190] For Aristophanes, great strength leads to rebellion and hubris. The restlessness created within us by our natural affinity for the heavenly spheres or our contemplation of the cosmos constitutes a kind of psychic strength, a certain quickness of mind, which is captured mythically by the physical strength and speed of our ancestors. The contemplation or questioning of the larger natural order naturally leads to a questioning of the narrower order within which we live, and this questioning is itself a kind of war on the gods, inasmuch as the gods are the guarantors of the narrower order within which we live.[191] The real strength here is psychic. In sum, part of what makes us distinctly human is a natural tendency to rebel that is attendant upon our psychic strength, and that is traceable to our natural affinity for the heavenly spheres.

---

[189] For an excellent discussion of how the human body contributes to the development of human reason, see Kass, Chapter 11, "Thinking About the Body". Cf. Xenophon *Memorabilia* Book I, chap. 4.

---

[190] In particular, it led them to make an assent into the heavens. Aristophanes' mythos reminds us of the biblical Tower of Babel story (*Genesis* 11.1-11.9). The men of that story were punished by God for building a tower that "reached unto heaven". Their punishment was that they lost their common language, and were divided or dispersed over the earth. We could say that their unity gave them strength, and their division and dispersal weakened them: at any rate, it ended their assent to heaven. Every effort to ascend to heaven is an act of rebellion against the god, and one that he punishes harshly: this lesson emerges from both Aristophanes' *mythos* and the biblical story.

It is interesting to consider Hobbes' account of this story, which points to the weakening effect on man of God's punishment for our rebellion:

> But all this language gotten, and augmented by *Adam* and his posterity, was again lost at the tower of *Babel*, when by the hand of God, every man was striken for his rebellion, with an oblivion of his former language. And being hereby forced to disperse themselves into several parts of the world, it must needs be, that the diversity of Tongues that now is, proceeded by degrees from them; and in tract of time grew everywhere more copious (*Leviathan* Chapter IV '*Of* Speech, 2nd para.)

God's punishment was debilitating because

> the most noble and profitable invention of all other, was that of SPEECH, consisting of *Names* or *Appellations*, and their Connexion; whereby men register their Thoughts; recall them when they are past; and also declare them one to another for mutual utility and conversation; without which, there had been amongst men, neither Common-wealth, nor Society, nor Peace, no more than amongst Lyons, Bears, and Wolves. (*Leviathan* Chapter IV '*Of* Speech', 1st para.)

God's punishment leads away from the Common-wealth, or politics, which is man's only hope for peace and prosperity. With Hobbes, as with Aristophanes, the god weakens us in punishment for our hubris in a manner that causes us to wonder whether he really has our best interests at heart. There is, however, this difference between them: whereas for Hobbes the punishment of the god leads away from politics and humanity, for Aristophanes it leads towards them (as we shall soon see). For the modern Hobbes, the wrath of god is contra politics and humanity, whereas for the ancient Aristophanes it supports them. This seems to be a reflection of the differing assessment of moderns and ancients as regards the role of, or need for, gods in politics.

This rebellion, being directed against the gods, presupposes them. Unlike the case with human beings, Aristophanes' *mythos* provides no account of where the gods came from, but simply posits them. They are just as they are already recognized to exist, much as in Pausanius' account. Pausanius, however, was a much looser thinker than Aristophanes, and unreflective about the gods. We surely cannot assume this of Aristophanes, whose plays generally evince a preoccupation with the gods. The most important fact about the gods as they figure in his *mythos* is that it is through their agency that our gradual transformation into our present human form occurs (in a two-step process, 190d-191a and 191b-c). From this single fact we can infer that the gods are part of what makes us distinctly human. This transformation is of course also a transformation towards the form of the gods, for men's conceptions of the gods are anthropomorphic. It is then we who make the gods in our own image. In saying that it is the gods who make us into our present form, Aristophanes thus seems to be saying that in making the gods, we make ourselves what we are. Be that as it may, the very idea of gods make understanding human nature much more complicated.

The motion from round form to present form represents a psychic reorientation away from the heavenly spheres, our 'parents', and towards our (anthropomorphic) gods. Aristophanes' *mythos* points to two things that make us distinctly human, but that seem to be in conflict: our affinity for the (supposedly divine) heavenly spheres, and the anthropomorphic gods. Seeing this naturally leads us to wonder how he ranks them in terms of their importance to our humanity. We can approach this issue by considering what he chooses to create as the comic element in his *mythos*, and the implications of his choice. Our ancestors, the ugly round men from whom we are descended, are the comic element in his *mythos*. If one actually tries to think of how they must have looked in order for the present human form to have emerged from them in the manner Aristophanes describes, one imagines a very funny picture indeed. Add to this their manner of movement, especially when they were in a hurry, and the picture surely rivals the comic effect of any created in his plays. The ugly round men are laughable (*geloion*), just as was the hiccoughing episode. Here, as there, the bodily humour is easy to grasp, and well within the reach of virtually anybody. But, as I argued above, some comedy goes beyond mere buffoonery, and there is a standard against which all comedy can be judged: whether or not it makes us laugh at things that are foolish and/or bad (and hence really worthy of laughter).[192] There are two reasons to think that Aristophanes adheres to this standard with his ugly round men. First, we have already seen how Aristophanes met this standard with the hiccoughing episode. But more importantly, given the evident seriousness with which Plato took the great comic genius, it is safe to assume that he indeed exemplifies the standard enunciated by Plato's Socrates, especially in Plato's own artistic portrayal of him. Thus, although the ugly round men represent part of what is distinctly human about us, there must also be something foolish and bad about them.

---

[191] See pp. 56-56 and n. 139 above.

The action of the *mythos* indicates what this is. The characters' in Aristophanes plays always get their just deserts. If Plato is true to Aristophanes, then this will be true also of the *mythos* he has him create. In this *mythos*, the ugly round men are punished severely: they receive a deforming wound from which many perish and all suffer horribly (190d with 191a-b). They are punished for attempting "to make an ascent into the sky with a view to assaulting the gods" (190c). Aristophanes means to say that they were justly punished for this: the hubris of attempting and assault on the gods is foolish and bad. That it is foolish is shown by the fact that the ugly round men foolishly overestimated their true strength: in the event, they proved to be not nearly so strong as they thought they were. In this, they were like the giants, who also came to a bad end for attempting to assault the gods (190b-c). Every assault on the gods is in effect an attempt to be gods, and Aristophanes seems to be sceptical as to whether any beings actually have the requisite strength for this. 'All those who would be gods, the gods would first make fools': this expresses a sentiment very close to his heart. As for why the hubris of impiety is bad, the reason must be the great importance of the element of our humanity that inheres in the gods, an element which is evidently of greater value than that which inheres in our natural affinity for the heavenly spheres. What, substantively, this is will become apparent as his *mythos* unfolds, but the corollary that he will by the end of his *mythos* make explicit is already clear at this point: that his *mythos* can be understood as a plea for piety (cf. 193a-b).

---

[192] See pp. 151-153 above.

Because we make gods in our own image, they rule as human rulers typically rule: for their own good rather than the good of their subjects. We see this clearly in the gods' response to our ancestors' assault on them. They deliberated as to what they should do (or 'make'; *poiësai*) with our ancestors, and were long perplexed (or 'at a loss', 'without resource'; *ëpóroun*). It is to be noted that they were not, however, at a similar loss as to what they should do with the giants: they simply obliterated them (190c). The difference in their treatment of the two races is not to be explained in terms of relative strength or power: they surely could have destroyed our ancestors with lightning, just as they had done with the giants. The reason why a problem arises with respect to our ancestors and not with respect to the giants is that our ancestors provided the gods with honours and sacrifices (190c). The gods' interest in their subjects is clearly selfish, and their stance towards them exploitive; they are tyrannical. The gods do not incline towards the justice of the City in Speech as outlined in Plato's *Republic*, which is one reason why True Justice or the Just City is an impossibility.

Well might Zeus be at a loss, for there seems to be no good solution to the problem with which he is confronted. On the one hand, if he kills our ancestors outright, he loses his honours and sacrifices, and on the other hand, if he lets the assault continue, he still loses his honours and sacrifices. The honours and sacrifices are the key to his problem. The assault of our ancestors upon the gods is such a problem for the gods because in destroying them they would have destroyed themselves; Zeus cannot exist without honours and sacrifices, or worship.[193] What essentially defines the gods as gods is not their origin, but simply whether or not they are worshipped: the sun is a god if it is worshipped, Zeus is a god if he is worshipped, and the members of a ruling caste are gods if they are worshipped. It is in the nature of the gods to be worshipped; this is Aristophanic theology.

---

[193] The dependency of the gods upon human honours and sacrifices is a not uncommon theme in Aristophanes' plays (e.g., *Peace* 191-194, 379-425; *Birds* whose basic plot could be said to be a man's seeking supreme rule by starving the gods of honours and sacrifices).

Zeus, threatened with the loss of honours and sacrifices, after having thought hard, comes up with a solution to the problem, and this solution is so brilliant that it shows he really is the rightful king of the gods:

> I seem to me [*dokö moi*][194] to have a device whereby human beings would continue to exist and at the same time, having become weaker, would stop their licentiousness. I shall now cut each of them in two, and they will be both weaker and more useful to us through the increase in their numbers. (190c-d)

With one cut (per person) he stops human licentiousness and doubles the number of his worshippers. Zeus cut our ancestors in half because weaker and more needy beings are more inclined to give honours and sacrifices, which is what he needs in order to exist. If he has to make his subjects worse off to get what he needs from them, so be it. Though his own existence is ultimately dependent upon the existence of his subjects, in the final analysis, he cares only for his own well-being and nothing for their well-being. And he is fully prepared to cut them again if "they are thought to behave licentiously still" (190d). His subjects need to be 'cut down to size', as it were. The gods do not *necessarily* have a problem with subjects who are whole and strong, but – as a practical matter – beings who are whole and strong are more inclined to hubris, and thus less inclined to offer honours and sacrifices. From the viewpoint of the gods – *and* of most humans, who disparage hubris as *at least* imprudent, if not simply unbecoming of a mere human – they are more inclined to behave in a 'licentious' manner.

With this cut, the human form changes so as to be more like it is now: humans now have two arms and two legs; their skin is pulled together where the cut was made and tied up in the navel; a belly is defined; the chest is shaped up and smoothed out; the face is turned around the same way as the belly (190e-a). These physical changes go hand in hand with a change in our psyche, upon which the power of the gods is now indelibly impressed. The reason why the face is turned around is because the god wishes us to remember that he has cut us: "And whenever he cut someone, he had Apollo turn

---

[194] As Leo Strauss observes, these are the first words of the dialogue (*Leo Strauss on Plato's Symposium* 126). This signals a return to the beginning, or a new beginning. Aristophanes' eulogy is a kind of return to the beginning. I will have more to say about this below.

[*metastréphein*[195]] the face [or, 'countenance', 'façade', 'mask'; *prósöpon*] and half the neck around to face the cut, so that in beholding his own cutting the human being might be more orderly" (190d-e). The cut of course leaves a huge gaping wound, which must be healed in some sense if we are to live on. Apollo does this, but only in such a way as to leave us with an ever-present reminder of our original affliction: "by drawing together the skin from everywhere toward what is now called the belly (just like drawstring bags) he made one opening, which he tied off in the middle of the belly, and that is what they call the navel" (190e). The navel is an ever-present reminder to us that the god has cut us in half, and of course that he can do so again. The gods keep us in line with a simple threat. This is how a tyrant rules, and the gods are, as I have observed, tyrants. Yet it is important to see that the threat supports the sense of awe that humans feel before the gods.

But in cutting and altering us, the gods almost killed us off. As it turns out, Zeus' solution was not so brilliant after all. Our original nature proved to be stronger and more resilient than he anticipated, and almost defeated him. Because our original nature was to be whole, we retained the desire to be whole even after being cut in half. So we kept getting entangled with other halves, whether they were actually our own or not, and consequently dying off from hunger and inactivity because we were unwilling to do anything apart from the other (191a-b). Thus, this erotic longing for wholeness is more powerful even than hunger (or so the *mythos* implies). Since the gods' original intent in cutting us was to preserve us in some form (190c), they have now to come up with some sort of improvisation that will enable us to survive. Zeus accomplishes this with a further alteration of our bodies: he moves our genitals around to the front. This solves the problem because it creates a kind of satiety in our coupling together, so that we could gain temporary respite from our feeling of alienation, and so can attend to work and the rest of livelihood. It also provides for a new means of generation – man in woman – that is viable in the post-cut world (191b-c).

---

[195] Socrates uses this word in discussing the true education with Glaucon in Book VII of *Republic*:

> "There would, therefore," I said, "be an art of this [turning around], concerned with the way in which this power can most easily and efficiently be turned around [*metastraphësetai*], not an art of producing sight in it [i.e., the soul]. Rather, this art takes as given that sight is there, but not rightly turned nor looking at what it ought to look at, and accomplishes this object." (518d)

Socrates comes down to us as the greatest teacher in history, and we have seen that Aristophanes is also a great teacher. The way that these men use the word *metastréphein* indicates something about what they understand by education, and to what, substantially, it amounts. The true art of education for Socrates does not put knowledge into souls, it only turns them around to see what they already have the power to see. In 'turning around', one turns from the realm of becoming to face the things which really and fully are, the forms, and ultimately the form of the good, in the realm of being. But for Aristophanes, the essential 'turning around' involves a turn, not to permanent being, but rather to the full and complete comprehension of the single most important thing which comes into being: the power of the god. Again, the teaching that Plato puts into Aristophanes' mouth is a teaching on eros that is simultaneously a teaching on the essential role of the gods in distinctly human eros. And the elements of the distinctly human *life*, together with their protection and preservation, is of the greatest importance for Aristophanes. But this then means that becoming is of greater value than being for Aristophanes. This is one way to understand the difference between Aristophanes and Socrates, and is perhaps also the first difference between philosophy and poetry. The quality of the education offered by either man is affected accordingly.

The navel and the genitals are of course two physical attributes closely associated with eros in its primary sense of sexual congress for the purpose of reproduction. Our genitals are the tools of sexual congress, and our navels are the remnants of the life-line that tied us to the female who brought us to birth. I said above that Aristophanes abstracts from eros in its primary sense because there is nothing about eros in its primary sense that distinguishes man from the brutes (cf. 192c, 207a-d). Other higher primates have similar physical attributes because they are characterized by the same basic division of sexual labour. But what Aristophanes' *mythos* shows us is that we attribute psychical meaning and significance to the simply physical that does not exist, or rather that did not *originally* exist. This is to *beautify* it. This beautification is a poetic exercise, which in effect accomplishes the logically impossible task of creating something from nothing. It is by means of this poetic exercise that the human animal is originally elevated above the other animals. Following Aristophanes' poetry, the navel is no longer simply the remainder of the means of sustenance for the unborn offspring; it is rather a reminder of the power of the god. And the genitals are now no longer simply biomechanical tools whereby the male impregnates the female; they have been arranged by the gods out of pity so that we could find some sort of satisfaction in loving union and get on with the rest of life.[196] We see that our navels remind us of the power of gods to harm us, and our genitals of their power to benefit us. But more importantly, we see that the simply natural eros of human beings is confounded with the beautiful gods, and because of this, it is beautified. The poetry that elevates the human animal above the other animals is essentially connected with the gods. This is why, of the two things that his *mythos* originally identified as elements of the distinctly human – our psychic affinity for the heavenly spheres, and for the gods – the gods are of greater value. For our psychic affinity for the heavenly spheres, while it does indeed make us distinctly human, does not beautify and hence elevate and ennoble us in the same manner as do the gods.

The simply natural eros of human beings is confounded with the gods in the process that brings about distinctly *human* eros. Aristophanes signals this state of affairs with the fact that the gods are directly responsible for our current human form, and it is only once the gods have finished altering us into our current form, which point is finally achieved with the movement of our genitals, that Aristophanes explicitly introduces our eros:

> So it is really from such early times that human beings have had, inborn in themselves, Eros for one another – Eros, the bringer-together of their ancient nature, who tries to make one out of two and to heal their ancient nature. (191c-d)

It is only in light of our current form that our eros makes sense. The implication is that the human beings prior to our current form, the ugly round men, were anerotic. This makes sense, inasmuch as they were akin to the heavenly spheres, which would seem to be wholly anerotic.[197]

---------- * ---------- * ----------

---

[196] The orgasm is in effect a gift of god. There is a curious thing about the movement of our genitals around to the front: that it makes possible (for heterosexuals) face to face sexual congress. No other animal is able to, or does, do this. The two stage alteration of humans to their present form draws attention to the fact that there is, after all, a distinctly human aspect to our eros even in its primary sense.

[197] As I discussed above in the context of Eryximachus' materialistic cosmology (see p. 137 above), the motion of the heavenly spheres is simply circular and repetitive, and not at all like the motion of a living erotic being from birth to prime to death; they are perhaps the very archetype of anerotic being.

Yet this is difficult to reconcile with what Aristophanes explicitly says of the ugly round men: that they had genitals (190a), and that "they generated and gave birth not in one another but in the earth, like cicadas" (191b-c). The erotic natures of the ugly round men were not recognizably human, but they were erotic nonetheless, as erotic as cicadas. His account of the origins of human eros actually takes as its departure point an already erotic beginning, for cicadas are indeed erotic: they reproduce and they have a male and a female, i.e., a division of sexual labour.[198] Aristophanes either does not know this, or does not care. In either event, he evidently has little interest in an eros that is not recognizably human. He thus seems to suggest that specifically human eros can indeed be fully understood *apart from* a full understanding of non-human eros, that is, apart from a full understanding of eros that pervades animate nature in general. The thing of paramount importance for him is the human, and we need not go beyond the human to a wider 'nature' in order to understand the human. To rephrase: what matters is not nature simply but rather distinctly *human* nature, and one can indeed fully understand human nature apart from a full understanding of nature simply. And in fact, the effort to understand nature simply can even lead *away* from the understanding of human nature, and in so doing undercut both the understanding and existence of it.

With this observation, we come to the heart of Aristophanes' criticism of Socrates and philosophy. In taking us back to the mythical origins of our humanity, Aristophanes points to a certain irreducible tension between nature simply and human nature in particular. To say this more precisely, there is for him a certain tension between knowledge of 'nature' on the one hand, and human eros and the gods on the other. This tension is somehow connected to the problem of the basis of beauty, i.e., whether there is a simply natural basis for beauty, or whether beauty inheres ultimately only in human nature and the gods. The attack on Socrates and philosophy that Aristophanes makes in *Clouds* shows a philosopher preoccupied with the things in the heavens and below the earth, and who accordingly misses the mere humans, or 'ephemerals', stuck in between. This Socrates is more likely to know about the nature of cicadas than the nature of humans, and this is ridiculous. Everything that is wrong with the philosopher, including and especially his atheism, is traceable to his concern with 'nature' and the cosmos, and his concomitant ignorance of human things, especially of human eros.

---

[198] The sexual reproduction of cicadas is really quite fascinating. Their distinctive sound, the 'song' of the cicadas, is actually the sound a male (and most cicadas are males) makes in an effort to attract females. After mating, the female lays eggs in trees, from which larvae emerge. These fall and burrow into the ground, where they can remain for one to seventeen years (hence it might be erroneously believed that they generate and give birth in the earth). See Neil Schlager, ed., *Grzimek's Animal Life Encyclopedia, 2nd Ed., Vol 3, Insects* 270. Lest it be supposed that this insight into the sex life of cicadas is based on modern science, and hence beyond the ancient Greeks, see Aristotle *The History of Animals* 556a14-b21.

We can recognize the Socrates of *Clouds* in the ugly round men of the current *mythos*. In *Clouds*, Aristophanes presents Socrates as foolish and bad, hence as laughable (*geloion*) according to Socrates' own standard of comedy.[199] By the end of the play, he is punished: his 'thinkery' is burned to the ground and its inhabitants are dispersed (much as the Arcadians were dispersed by the Spartans, 193a). This punishment occurs through the agency of the main protagonist of the play, Strepsiades, but it is done in the name of, and for the sake of, the gods. By the end of the play, Strepsiades has become an instrument of the gods; Socrates is punished by the gods of the city. He is punished for "being hubristic toward the gods", and "doing injustice to the gods" (*Clouds* 1506 and 1509). He is punished, that is, for his impiety, just as were the ugly round men. When Socrates first appears in *Clouds*, he appears suspended above the ground in a basket. He is literally 'above it all', above the concerns of mere 'ephemerals', which is how he addresses the first to whom he speaks (*Clouds* 223). In being so aloft and aloof, in looking down on the ephemerals, Aristophanes seems to suggest that Socrates also looks down on their gods (*Clouds* 226-227), which are the gods of the city. He looks down on them because he contemplates the sun (*Clouds* 225 and 228-232). Socrates has a natural affinity for the heavenly spheres, and the play demonstrates the psychic strength he derives from this natural affinity (especially his supreme continence or moderation, and endurance or patience). In this he is again like the ugly round men of the *mythos*. The direct consequence of his natural affinity for the heavenly spheres is that he thinks a great deal about divine matters, and is (reportedly) able to teach them "plainly" (*Clouds* 250-251). We can surmise that to know of the true 'divinities', the simply natural forces that rule the earth, is to know that the gods of the city do not exist. For Socrates does indeed deny that these gods exist (*Clouds* 247-248, 365-385). The questioning of divinities that goes on in the thinkery and in which we witness Socrates engaged is in effect an assault on the gods, regardless of how he intends it. The effect he has upon Strepsiades and his son by the end of the play show us this. The super-strong Socrates assaults the gods, just as do the ugly round men. Socrates is *the* ugly round man. The criticisms that Aristophanes levels against Socrates in *Clouds* are essentially maintained in *Symposium*.

---

[199] See pp. 151-153 above.

Socrates could respond to these criticisms by arguing that his investigation of nature simply or nature as a whole does *not* lead him to ignorance of human things because, through his study of nature, he is able to uncover a natural basis for beauty. So far from being ignorant of human eros, his awareness of a natural basis for beauty rather contributes to his expertise in *ta erotika*. There is thus no necessary tension between nature simply – if it is properly understood – and distinctly *human* nature. And he could argue that there is a simply natural basis for the beauty that is integral to human eros. We can glean the substance of Socrates' defence against Aristophanes by returning to the issue of the cicadas. To reiterate, the ugly round men to whom he likens Socrates are for Aristophanes anerotic,[200] and yet he also says that they have genitals and reproduce after the fashion of cicadas.[201] The implication is that the erotic nature of cicadas is for Aristophanes not important: even if they are somehow erotic, they are not *humanly* erotic, and so there is no need to consider them. And it is an interest in cicadas that is precisely the sort of thing for which Aristophanes ridicules Socrates in *Clouds*. But if there *is* beauty in cicadas, and in particular in the erotic nature of cicadas, then this undercuts Aristophanes' case against Socrates. For then we can understand Socrates' interest in insects like cicadas as a consequence of his openness to beauty, or as an expression of his erotic nature.

If Socrates can look to cicadas, which are indeed simply natural rather than humanly natural, and see beauty, then the philosophic inquiry into nature that Aristophanes ridicules is not necessarily contra beauty and poetry. And if he sees in cicadas a kind of beauty that could charm even a city, then obviously his erotic activity does not necessarily make him ignorant of human nature, nor of the poetic basis of the city's gods. The representative of the original city in this dialogue is Phaedrus, and in the dialogue named after him we see Socrates in conversation with him about erotic matters. That dialogue takes place entirely outside the city walls, and almost entirely in a simply natural setting of great beauty: the plane tree, the stream, the grass, and the cicadas (whose song provides them with a natural background music), all contribute to make this a beautiful place to talk about erotic matters (*Phaedrus* 230b-c). Here Socrates provides Phaedrus with an erotic education; we could say that he appeals to him from a perspective or vantage point beyond the city, from the perspective of natural beauty. The simply natural song of the cicadas is beautiful, so beautiful that it might be believed to be the original song of the muses. So Socrates invests them with mythical significance. The cicadas were originally humans, before the time of the Muses, and when song was revealed they became so enraptured of singing that they stopped eating and drinking and literally wasted away to almost nothing. Socrates creates a little *mythos* that parallels the *mythos* of Aristophanes in many respects: some human beings from long ago died off due to hunger and the rest of inactivity, their simply natural bodies were altered to their present state through the action of the city's gods (in this case, the Muses), and the physical was endowed with psychical significance. The difference is that Socrates' *mythos* is grounded in a wider nature than Aristophanes'. It finds beauty in nature, *and* constructs a beautiful *mythos* around it of human significance. This leads people to see in the simply natural special pertinence for the distinctly human. In this way, the tension between nature simply and human nature is alleviated: Socrates' interest in cicadas supports rather than undermines the Muses. In supporting the gods of the city, it supports the city, and maintains its essential boundaries. Socrates' little cicadas *mythos* occurs in the context of a (stylised[202]) discussion of the creation of the laws of the city. This issue arises at a time when the sun's heat is the most stifling, i.e., a time when people would naturally be driven to sleep. But Socrates says that he and Phaedrus must not sleep, that they must consider in what way the speeches that bring the laws into being are beautiful are not, for if they do not, the cicadas, who now bring the Muses report of human's activities, will report ill of them (*Phaedrus* 257c-259e). Socrates uses a beautiful *mythos* grounded in nature to appeal to Phaedrus' ascetic sensibilities, in order to drive him forward in a consideration of what makes laws beautiful, which is a question of the highest value for the city.

---

[200] See p. 175 above.
[201] See p. 176 above.

---

[202] They are actually talking about speechwriting, and Socrates has adduced the introduction of new laws as instances of speechwriting.

---------- * ---------- * ----------

The fully and distinctly human eros, which emerges only after the movement of our genitals, is eros for another human being; it is the part of our nature that pushes us to come together, and *stay* together, so as to be whole and complete again (191c-d). Because of the prominence of our genitals in the origin of eros, it might be supposed (erroneously) that this union is to be attained through sexual congress. But Aristophanes makes it clear that sex is not to be confused with eros (192c), although it may be consistent with eros. To reiterate, eros has the power to create happiness rather than pleasure (189d), though happiness encompasses pleasure.

Now heterosexuals are slices from the third original human tribe, the one that combined the male and female, the one called 'androgynous'. The men who originate in this tribe are not simply lovers of women, they are also possible adulterers, and likewise with the women. The problem of adultery only arises for heterosexuals; it is not mentioned for lesbians, who originate in the female tribe, or for pederasts, who originate in the male tribe (191d-a). Whereas both heterosexuals and homosexuals fornicate, only heterosexuals can be adulterers because only heterosexuals (until very recently) can marry. The question here is what the significance of this distinction is. Is it just a question of semantics, traceable to arbitrary customs or laws, or is it somehow rooted in human nature? Aristophanes would give the latter answer. There is a simply natural connection between a female and her offspring, of which our navel reminds us, and there is a simply natural connection between a female and a male, of which our genitals remind us. These two simply natural connections form two legs of the triangle of human reproduction. The missing leg is a simply natural connection between a male and the offspring of a female. That connection is only made through marriage, which is not natural in the same sense as the first two, but rather natural to humans. Marriage is the specifically human part of reproduction, and essential to the process whereby males and females are transformed into men and women. Men and *not* males will care for their children. But, as a general rule, it is only possible to get a man to care for, support, and protect a child if he is convinced that the child is his. The marriage of a man and woman sanctifies the exclusive sexual congress of *that* man and *that* woman so that *that* man can be sure that the child which *that* woman bears is indeed *his*. Without the sense of certainty that this sanctification engenders among men, it is not possible to get them to take an interest in the well-being of any particular children.[203] And if only women care for children, then the quality of the human stock stagnates or declines due to a nurture that is necessarily less and insecure, and the human race suffers in consequence. Marriage is at the heart of family, and the uniquely human division of sexual labour, which elevates us above the animals. And as the primary purpose of marriage is to bind men to children, marriage is primarily about men.

Aristophanes initially alerted us to the question of how the transformation from male and female to men and women occurs with the introduction of the three original human tribes,[204] and now he suggests an answer: marriage and family. The question remains a mystery, however, inasmuch as marriage is inseparable from the city whose laws support and sanctify it. The emergence of politics, in turn, would seem to presuppose men and women as opposed to males and females, i.e., it would seem to presuppose humanity. Somehow these things all emerge together, and yet the existence of each presupposes the existence of the other: marriage and family, men and women (i.e., humanity), and politics.

However that may be, the key to the problem would seem to be men. Politics is clearly for Aristophanes naturally the realm of men. This, and not an interest in homosexuals, much less a desire to eulogize them, is what explains why the bulk of his discussion of halves seeking to be whole is about men who originate in the wholly male tribe, and why he spends so little time talking about people originating in the androgynous tribe, and even less time – barely a mention – on women originating in the female tribe (191d-192b). He begins his discussion of men who originated in the male tribe by observing that they are "naturally the manliest" (192a). But as I have observed above, there is really no way to use origin in the male tribe as an explanation for maleness, let alone manliness.[205] To say that all three of the tribes were "like their parents" the heavenly spheres is not at all helpful in terms of understanding the psychic character of sexes (190b). The male tribe was like the sun, which makes sense inasmuch as the potency of the sun is naturally associated with masculinity, but the sun is anerotic. The notion that maleness or manliness is somehow explainable by its origin in the sun is, when we think about it, ridiculous, and hence laughable. Yet rhetorically, it works exceedingly well. On the surface, it seems sensible to speak of the men who originated in the male tribe as being the most manly – after all, they are 'all man'. And it is appealing to his predominantly homosexual audience, for the implication of this origin of the manliest men is that the manliest men are naturally attracted to other men. Aristophanes thus seems to tell the bulk of his audience that they are the manliest. For these reasons, the notion that manliness is somehow explainable by its origin in the sun is not laughed at, notwithstanding the fact that it is laughable. That he himself considers his surface argument here to be ridiculous, and hence laughable, is suggested by the fact that it stands in stark contrast to his position in his comedies. In all of his comedies he is openly hostile, or at any rate openly derisive, to homosexuals. They are continually the 'butt end' of his jokes.

---

[203] I.e., generally – for we are reminded in this dialogue that there are exceptions to this rule by the presence of Alcibiades, who was not raised by his father, but rather by Pericles. But since only certain types of men will do this, they are not enough to affect the way in which the human young are nurtured; such cases do not really change the basic point.

[204] See pp. 165-166 above.

In saying ridiculous things about manliness, a subject that Aristophanes in fact takes very seriously, he shows us notions about manliness that are not to be taken seriously. This is his way of guiding us into a thoughtful consideration of what manliness is. He observes that some assert that boys who "enjoy lying down together with and embracing men" are "shameless", but, he says, "they lie" (191e-a). To say that such boys are shameless is to reproach them. This reminds us of the word he said, at the beginning of his *mythos*, is now a term of reproach: androgyne (189e). The natural basis for the term as a reproach is that the meaning of both man and woman is traceable to the *differing* role of each in the division of sexual labour; the idea of sexual difference is intrinsic to the meaning of either man or woman. An effeminate man, one in whom womanly qualities are noticeably present, is not therefore a 'real' man, not as much of a man as he is 'naturally' meant to be, and hence the reproach.[206] The boys that he is talking about here are reproached as 'shameless' for much the same reason. So why then does Aristophanes say that those who call them shameless lie? He says of these boys that it is not "out of shamelessness that they do this, but out of boldness, manliness, and masculinity, feeling affection for what is like to themselves" (192a). His claim that they do it out of boldness causes us to wonder: why would boldness be required here? Is it not required precisely to overcome a sense of shame? As for the claim that they do it out of manliness and masculinity, this is patently sophistical, for the meaning of manliness and masculinity is precisely what is at issue here. And whereas he implies that feeling affection for what is like to oneself is bold, manly and masculine, this actually runs counter to the general thrust of his whole *mythos*, for on this basis, *every* human being would be bold, manly and masculine: every human being, whether they originate in the male, female, or androgynous tribes, naturally desires union with other slices from the same whole, i.e., every human being naturally feels affection for what is like to him or herself (cf. 193c). He continues: "And there is a great proof of this, for once they have reached maturity, only men of this kind go off to political affairs" (192c). This, surely, is patently absurd. History is replete with heterosexual men going off to political affairs. The cases of Pericles and Alcibiades, who were both accomplished womanisers and accomplished politicians, once more come to mind. He observes of these boys that: "When they are fully grown men, they are pederasts and naturally pay no attention to marriage and procreation, but are compelled to do so by the law; whereas they would be content to live unmarried with one another" (192a-b). But if it is these men that go off to political affairs, then it is they who are the political leaders, and consequently they who frame the laws. Why would they make laws that are prejudicial to their own natural inclinations? Actually, this rhetorical question points to the serious element in what Aristophanes is saying. If we set aside the ridiculous part of what he is saying, then what we are left with is the proposition that men go off to political affairs. The active participation in political affairs, or, more simply, the city, constitutes the standard of manliness.[207]

---

[205] See p. 166 above.

---

[206] We are reminded of this at the end of Aristophanes' eulogy, when he says:

> And please don't let Eryximachus suppose, in making a comedy my speech, that I mean Pausanius and Agathon – perhaps they have found their own and are both naturally born males. (193b-c)

It is manifestly absurd that these two soft men could be held up as representatives of his naturally born males, and if they are, then the idea of naturally born males enunciated in the *mythos* must be empty. Agathon is ridiculed in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusai* for his effeminate qualities.

It is in the context of this discussion of men, marriage, law, and politics that Aristophanes provides his consummate expression of the meaning of eros (192c-e). This again points to the essential connection between eros and the city. His expression of the meaning of eros is surpassingly beautiful, and this surely counts as *some* sort of endorsement of Aristophanes' position by Plato. That is, Plato puts what are arguably the most beautiful words of the dialogue, and indeed words that can be counted among the most beautiful ever written about love in the whole history of humanity, into his mouth. The groundwork for this expression has of course been prepared by the whole *mythos* to this point: because of our ancient natures, we desire to be with who we love unceasingly; we desire, in effect, to become whole or complete beings through our loving union with our 'other half', another embodied soul. "So eros is the name for the desire and pursuit of the whole" (192e-a). This expresses the sense of wholeness inherent in the lovers' embrace, or in mutual eroticism. The lover qua lover is blind to everything else; the lovers' embrace is the sufficient source of all happiness. The lover that one holds in one's arms is *one's own* lover. The experience of completeness that the embrace creates obtains precisely because the lover is *one's own* original self, one's missing half. What Aristophanes explains (mythically) is a very powerful psychic impulse in us all: the impulse to love something *simply because* it is our own.[208] The love of our own is so powerful at least in part because it is rooted in our own bodies: our bodies are required for our survival, and in order to preserve our bodies we must love them. This is of course a problem if what is our own is not beautiful. Eros for the beautiful is another powerful psychic impulse in us all, the one which Socrates will champion in his eulogy. Because what is ours may not be beautiful, and because we are naturally impelled to love the beautiful, we are driven to *make* what is ours beautiful, to beautify it, if only in our own minds. This is an essentially poetic process, and so anyone in love with a person who is less than perfect is a poet: love makes poets of everyone it touches, as Agathon will soon say (196e). Aristophanes' *mythos* beautifies what is one's own: we love our own lover because we find wholeness, completion, and fulfilment in our lover. This makes the love beautiful, regardless of whether or not the lover is actually ugly. It is vitally important to see, however, that this poetic beautification of what is one's own extends beyond the lover in one's arms. It extends to include all that is one's own, including one's own possessions, one's own family, and especially the thing that protects possessions and family, one's own city. The psychic impulse that leads one to see everything of any significance in one's lover is at bottom the same psychic impulse that creates a connection between the individual and the city.

---

[207] As it must be, given his non-philosophical character. Cf. pp. 156-157 and n. 194 above.

[208] Which also explains the peculiar particularity of 'falling in love' – our *discriminating* reaction to the set of possible other 'halves'.

There is a fundamental problem with the love of one's own, and that problem is death. Eventually, one's own body will in fact decay to the point where it no longer is able to support life, and then all the things that one loved as one's own will be lost. Aristophanes beautifies the love of two *embodied* souls. When one of those embodied souls die, that must mark the end of the love. What the lover wants is to be as one with the other half *forever*. This is the psychology of mutual eroticism. Anyone who consciously desires to be with their lover only for 'a while', i.e., anything short of forever, is not actually in love. But, because of death, this love cannot last forever. Any lover who thinks about it cannot deny the truth of this, and this makes it hard to love. One cannot consider the lovers' embrace as being of supreme importance if one is fully aware that that embrace is necessarily a merely passing or ephemeral thing. So if the force and vitality of mutual eroticism is to be maintained, then the problem of death needs to be fudged, which is what Hephaestus accomplishes in this *mythos*. If Hephaestus with his tools were to come to the lovers and offer:

> I am willing to fuse you and make you grow together into the same thing, so that – though two – you would be one; and as long as you lived you would both live together just as though you were one; and when you died, there again in Hades you would be dead together as one instead of as two. So see if you love this and would be content if you got it. (192e)

Every lover would accept this offer, and it would be "self-evident that he wants nothing else than this" (192e). But the offer to fuse the lovers together into one in life and in death, really points to the limit of the love of one's own. Hephaestus' offer to fuse us in death as in life really presupposes a continuity between life and death; it is an offer to remove the limitations of death, which is in effect an offer of immortality. To rephrase, Hephaestus provides a beautifying illusion about death that supports mutual eroticism. Lovers have either to believe that they are deathless, or somehow keep their mind off death in order to be lovers. Really to think about death is to think about the finiteness of the love of one's own, and that is to destroy it. In order adequately to give voice to the infinite experience of love, Aristophanes has to provide a decidedly and consciously finite or limited account of it, one that is limited precisely in view of its treatment of the problem of death. The beauty of the account is critically dependent upon the denial or forgetting of death.

What the god accomplishes for the lovers, he also accomplishes for the city. Human life in general is made meaningful by the gods in the same way Hephaestus makes the union between the lovers meaningful: by beautifying it through the denial or forgetting of death. The city, like the gods, is a kind of denial or forgetting of death. It is larger than life; individual men can fight and die for it because it lives on after them. And because the city lives on after men who fight and die for it, their progeny can live on after them in the city, in a context that those who sacrifice can envision because it is recognizable from their own experience of life in the city. The city offers a bond between generations that is like the bond Hephaestus offers between lovers, inasmuch as it fudges the problem of death. Once again, we see in Aristophanes' *mythos* the same psychology in the union of lovers as in the union of the city. If the physical union of lovers (as per Aristophanes' imagery) is to last forever, then the body has to last forever; the beauty of the union of lovers lies, as I have said, in the denial or forgetting of death. The denial or forgetting of death elevates the importance of the body and all that goes with it, including and especially our possessions. The city comes together to satisfy physical needs. As with the union of lovers, the union of human beings in a city requires that we regard what is our own as beautiful simply because it is our own: our laws are the right laws simply because they are our laws, our land is inviolable simply because it is our land, our fellow citizens are special to us simply because they alone of all the human beings of the world belong to our city, and in sum, our way of life is best simply because it is our way of life. We beautify our city the same way we beautify our lovers. In order to love the city as our own wholeheartedly, we have to forget that it too is merely a passing and ephemeral thing, and this requires the same forgetting of death. Hephaestus, the artisan god that offers the lovers (illusory) immortality, is above all else a god of the city. He is an agent of immortality inhering in the city, which makes the city itself immortal.

This issue of the problem of death as regards love and politics was prefigured by Phaedrus' eulogy. Phaedrus, a thoroughly political man, eulogized eros for the power it has to intensify the feeling of honour and shame that people have in the face of "beautiful deeds" (178c-d). The pleasure of being observed by a lover or beloved in doing some noble thing is extremely powerful, and this makes such actions more likely to occur. This redounds to the benefit of the city, for the noble deeds that especially impress him are the acts of courage associated with war (178d-b). The most noble and courageous deed of all is the noble death. The way that he says it, the lover that dies for his beloved also dies for his city. The good of the beloved and the good of the city are confounded. The most that people can give for love and politics is their lives, but when Phaedrus starts to talk about lovers who were willing to die nobly, he has no way to explain the phenomenon, since, being dead, they will not be able to enjoy the intense pleasure of being observed by their beloved in the act of their noble deed. Phaedrus is thus obliged to invoke the gods in order to account for the thing that impresses him most (179b-180b). The gods, who are immortal, see and appreciate the beautiful death, and the lover can take pleasure in this highest admiration. Moreover, the god may be so impressed as to return the lover to life. The god fudges the problem of death, just as Hephaestus does here. The god allows us to think that death is not really the problem that it is.[209] The practical effect of this is to support simultaneously the love of one's own lover, and of one's own city. That it is able to support simultaneously these two things shows us how very closely related they are.

---

[209] See p. 56 above.

This intimate connection between love and politics is suggested by the subtle change of language that Aristophanes uses in discussing the gods' relation to human beings. Initially in this *mythos* about eros, we are each of us one and cut (or, 'cut through', 'cut up'; *diatemô*) by the god into two, and the desire to become one again explains eros. However, towards the end of the *mythos*, we are not 'cut' but rather 'dispersed' (or 'banished' – the word has legal connotations; *diökisthëmen*): "And previously, as I say, we were one; but now through our injustice we have been dispersed by the god, just as the Arcadians were dispersed by the Spartans" (193a). A human is cut, a people is dispersed. In treating these things as the same, Aristophanes indicates that the city comes into being along with specifically human eros, or that the psychology of the love of one's own lover is the same as the psychology of the love of one's own city. To rephrase, he indicates that his *mythos* provides an account of the erotic basis of politics.

The Spartans weakened the Arcadians because they perceived in them a threat (Xenophon, *Hellenica* Book V, ch. ii). The Spartans ruled and the Arcadians were a rebellious subject population. This situation is parallel to that which existed between the gods and the ugly round men. The harm that the gods inflicted on them was a response to their hubris, which led them to make an assault on the gods. The demeanour and activity of the ugly round men is never characterized as unjust. The first use of the word 'injustice' in Aristophanes' eulogy to eros occurs in the above quote. The rebellious activity of the ugly round men could not be unjust because it occurred prior to the coming into being of justice, i.e., prior to the cut, from which originates both distinctly *human* eros and the city. Justice is wholly a thing of the city, and the city *comes into being* along with distinctly human eros. Justice is the name for the laws of the city, or in general the way of the city. The Arcadians were a threat to the Spartan way, and hence they were unjust. Whatever is contra the city is unjust. Again, we see that the city is the standard for Aristophanes. There can be nothing like a 'form' of justice for Aristophanes, which means that the philosophical quest in which Socrates engages Glaucon and Adeimantus in *Republic* is ultimately a beautiful poetic illusion.

The parallel between the gods and the Spartans makes the Spartans god-like. This is because they are. The god post-cut inheres in Sparta, or, more generally, in the city, of which Sparta is the 'purest' exemplar. Injustice is hence practically equivalent to impiety.[210]

---------- * ---------- * ----------

There is an irreducible tension between the god in Sparta, or the gods of the city, and the natural gods, or the heavenly spheres: sun, moon, and earth. Considering it brings the tension I discussed above, between nature and simply and human nature in particular, into sharper focus.[211] The heavenly spheres are 'natural' gods both in that they are emblematic of 'higher' powers, and in that all men, Greeks and barbarians, recognize them as gods (*Clouds* 225-226, 584-586, 1506-1507; *Peace* 406-411; *Birds* 1572-1573; *Apology* 26d). The heavenly spheres are natural gods that can be seen with the unaided eye: no *mythoi* are required to make them apparent. Moreover, their grace and splendour and eternity seem to be manifest, and their majestic power over the cycles of life and the eternally changing seasons is evident. But the Greeks and barbarians have other gods as well as the heavenly spheres, gods which are *unique* to them, and which are an essential part of what defines them as the kind of people they are. The barbarian does not recognize Zeus as the king of the gods. The splitting of the original and simply natural human beings in Aristophanes' *mythos* can, as I suggested above, be understood to represent the division or dispersal of human beings into different *kinds* of human beings. This division or dispersal of original or simply natural man into different *kinds* of human beings – which is finally inseparable from the existence of the gods of the city – is for Aristophanes essential to our existence as distinctly *human* beings. There is one massive fact that supports his position: the human animal is unique, among all animals, in respect of this division or dispersal. There are not, for example, different kinds of dogs in the same sense as there are different kinds of humans. It is of course true that there are different *breeds* of dogs, which correspond to the different *breeds* of humans: white, black, oriental and so on. But this division is not nearly so important a factor in determining the character of our existence as is the *political* division. A German Shepherd dog is everywhere the same, but a white human being is not; he differs greatly depending on the character of the city in which he lives, and this is clearly a function of the city's gods. The Greeks have specifically *Greek* gods – Zeus and the rest of the pantheon – and these gods are inseparable from 'Greekness'.

---

[210] The word pious does not occur until after the first use of injustice, both of which occur towards the end of Aristophanes' eulogy, after he has begun to speak in more overtly political terms. This suggests that the terms are closely linked and grounded in the city.

[211] See pp. 176-177 above.

But the rationale behind Aristophanes' position is more convincing than is the empirical evidence in support of it. The gods of the city are obviously inseparable from the existence of the city (which cannot be understood apart from the fact that it divides humanity in a way that is not simply natural, cf. *Republic* 441d-e), and our humanity requires above all that our simply natural eros be confounded with the gods of the city, or that the simply physical be poetically endowed with psychical significance – as his *mythos* endows our navels and genitals with psychical significance – in the creation of specifically *human* eros. *Only* the gods of the city, and not natural gods, can endow the physical with psychical significance. Zeus, and not the sun, cuts us and moves our genitals to the front. This is because Zeus, a god of the city, is active in human affairs, whereas the sun, a natural god, is not.

As I argued above, it is Aristophanes' position that our humanity requires that we be *elevated* out of our original or simply natural state, it requires that our existence be endowed with a significance that it does not have simply by nature, it requires beautification.[212] Poetry provides the required beautification, and it is thus required for our humanity. Aristophanes' *mythos* shows how beauty is *created* by the poet among us even where none originally exists.[213] His mythical confounding of our navels and genitals with the gods is a beautification of our navels and genitals, or of our simply natural selves. It is the means whereby the development of distinctly *human* eros occurs, or whereby the human animal is elevated above the other (natural) animals. The good of life itself is variable, and can be improved upon if it is valued higher, or if it is beautified.. The beautification of what is one's own, if it is integral to life, elevates life. Poetic power is the power to elevate life. The beautification of one's own can create something more than illusion, it can accomplish the logically impossible task of creating something from nothing; it can create one's own as something better than it was. For Aristophanes, beauty not only reflects good, it can also *create* it. The beautification of the poet is required because our navels and genitals are *not* by nature beautiful. Beauty or nobility is for Aristophanes wholly 'by man', and not at all 'by nature'. Hence, philosophy, which takes nature as the touchstone of its inquiry, must be integrated into poetry if it is to be of any specifically human value.[214] Because beauty is for Aristophanes 'by man' and not 'by nature', because it is created by the poet, because the beautiful poetic illusion supports not life in general but rather human life in particular, and is thus a part of specifically *human* nature rather than nature generally, it is by its very nature a *limiting* phenomenon. An *openness* to beauty requires of human beings that they be *closed* to nature simply, or to the whole of nature.

---

[212] See pp. 174-175 above.
[213] Cf. the beautification of what is our own. See pp. 184-187 above.

An openness to beauty, which is required for human health and happiness, thus demands of us that we *forget*. This forgetting is woven throughout the fabric of Aristophanes' eulogy to eros. We need to believe in beautiful and poetic gods to be human and happy, but – thanks to Pausanius and Eryximachus who have preceded him – we know too much to believe in them, and so we have to forget what we know in order to believe. This forgetting is captured perhaps most importantly in the supreme importance of the lovers' embrace, which – in order really to be believed by the lovers to be of supreme importance – requires of the lovers that they forget the problem of their own deaths. The embrace requires of the lovers that they forget themselves, or that they lose themselves in each other, or in the new whole created by their loving union. The same idea can be stated in visual language. The lovers' gaze is horizontal; the lovers look across at each other, rather than up at the heavenly spheres, which are associated in this *mythos* with knowledge. To love requires that you not look at what you know is there, or that you forget what you know; to love requires what could be described as purposeful ignorance or stupidity.[215] The city grows, as I have said, out of the lovers' embrace; the city requires the same purposeful ignorance or stupidity. The city requires boundaries in order to exist. But these boundaries do not simply exist in nature, and if we look to the heavenly spheres, or the natural gods, we see this. So we have again to forget in order for there to be politics. And in the end, Aristophanes simply forgets the essence of his great opponent, Socratic eros. He concludes by insisting that he wants to be taken seriously:

---

[214] Or, in the weightier words of Leo Strauss:

> From on high, one does not see human beings as they are (*Peace* 821-23). Hence not the sophist-philosopher but the poet is able to raise and answer the question that Socrates never raises, let alone answers, as to the goodness of the gods. Socrates, one may say, is a leader of souls (or of ghosts – *Birds* 1555) without being a knower of souls. If this is so, the truth discerned by the sophist-philosopher about the things aloft must be integrated into a whole that is the concern of the poet, despite the fact that that whole is part of the all-comprehensive whole with which the sophist-philosopher is concerned. (*Socrates and Aristophanes* 313)

> "Here, Eryximachus", he said, "is my speech about Eros, different from yours. So, just as I begged you, don't make a comedy of it, in order that we may listen to what each of the others – or rather, what each of the two – will say; for Agathon and Socrates are left" (193d-e).

He overlooks Aristodemus,[216] who is the image of his hero Socrates, and who is (since Socrates appears this evening unusually beautified) *Symposium's* personification of the way that Socrates' Diotima describes Eros: a daimonic power between the human and the gods (202e-204a). Aristodemus is now the image of Socratic eros. But since that eros is in the end directed above the human, to the form of the beautiful, it consequently diminishes the significance of more ordinary expressions of human eros. This is precisely the sort of thing that Aristophanes thinks is harmful to our humanity. It is, to reiterate, born of a view of nature that is too wide. Since Aristodemus is the image of this harmful Socratic eros, Aristophanes purposefully chooses not to see him, or to forget him.

But Socrates forgets nothing, and will not admit of any 'false' limitations and encumbrances on his reason. He prays to the universal gods, gods that existed before there were Greeks, and indeed even before there were barbarians; he prays to gods which are pre-political or simply natural.[217] He is then not really Greek, nor for that matter any other *kind* of human. He is a pre-political or simply natural man, but yet he is not a 'primitive', for he understands nature in a way that the 'primitives' could not. He understands nature in a way that was only made possible by the civilization of the city. In that sense, he is a post-political man living in the midst of politics, and obviously benefiting from them, and Aristophanes blames and ridicules him for this. The cold clear rationalism of Socrates makes him completely unpoetic and indifferent to beauty, just as are the brutes, and – even for all his admittedly admirable psychic qualities – this endows him with a certain unshakable aura of baseness. He is human, but yet somehow not quite recognizably human. He is something of a freak, much like the super-strong ugly round men. In likening him to them, Aristophanes implies that Socrates is anerotic. These ideas all then cluster around Socrates: catholic rationalism, atheism, indifference to beauty, baseness/ugliness, and aneroticism. The common theme running through all of them is that they all work against the essence of politics: the *not* simply natural division of humanity. Socrates and philosophy are contra politics. This would seem to be the most succinct way to express the reason for Aristophanes' opposition to them.

---

[215] Thus, Francis Bacon observes in his essay *Of Love* (Essay 10):

> It is a poor saying of Epicurus, *Satis magnum alter alteri theatrum sumus* [We are, one to another, a theatre (or 'spectacle') ample enough]: as if a man, made for the contemplation of heaven and all noble objects, should do nothing but kneel before a little idol, and make himself subject, though not of the mouth (as beasts are), yet of the eye, which was given them for higher purposes. It is a strange thing to note the excess of this passion, and how it braves the nature and value of things… and therefore it was well said, *That it is impossible to love and to be wise.*

[216] See Appendix A.

---------- * ---------- * ----------

If our ancestors were dispersed after the cut, then when they came together in an effort to reconstitute their lost natures, they may have – in confusion – become entangled with halves of other wholes. In any event, when they came together, some of the halves died due to their inactivity, so that the remaining halves then became entangled with other halves that could not possibly have been their own (191a-b). And, of course, after the movement of our genitals, we began to reproduce in a human fashion, and we thus became further removed from our original nature. Much time has passed since the cut, and many halves have come and gone. The result is that our original natures are now gone forever. Eros is the desire to recapture our original wholeness through loving union with another embodied soul, but this is no longer fully possible. If eros is indeed the "most philanthropic" of the gods and the one that makes us happy, and if eros is a desire that can never really be satisfied, then happiness is simply not a possibility for human beings. We are doomed to live our lives always lacking what we need most, no matter how hard we try to get it, or how well we live. Aristophanes in fact acknowledges this dreary reality at the end of his eulogy. If it was best to return to our ancient nature through loving union, then "in the present circumstances, that which is closest to it is the best; and that is to chance to meet a favourite whose nature is to one's mind" (193c). The most that we can possibly hope for is only an approximation of true love, and hence only an approximation of true happiness. The truth is that human beings are tragic beings because of their erotic natures. Properly considered, the larger context of this charming comedy is a deep and painful tragedy. Aristophanes thus proves the point that Socrates compels him and Agathon to agree to at the end of the evening, when all the others have either left or fallen asleep, and the three of them are left alone to drink and converse: that "the same man should know how to make tragedy and comedy" (223d).

---

[217] The only time in *Symposium* where Socrates is noted to have prayed, his prayer was to the sun (220d).

Because human nature, and so too the nature of the gods, has forever changed, the nature of the threat from the gods has changed. If we are impious or unjust we may be split again, but the next time it will be different:

> There is the fear then, that if we are not orderly in our behaviour towards the gods, we shall be split[218] again and go around like those who are modelled in relief on stelae, sawed through our nostrils, like dice. For this reason, every man [*ándra*] must be exhorted to be pious toward the gods in all his acts. (193a)

Now that the god inheres in the city, he is no longer capable of cutting us the same way he did initially. Rather, he will split us, if he does, through our own neglect. If we neglect the city, if we do not respect it, and honour it in speech and in deed, then it will be diminished, and hence so too will man, for the standard of manliness is the city. The split references a diminution of man that is qualitatively different from the original cut. What are modelled in relief on stelae are almost two-dimensional because they are depicted on a plane. They are in that sense not unlike shadows cast on a wall. The worry here is that if we are impious or unjust, if we neglect god and city, we will lose our substance or depth, and become mere shadows of our former selves. Aristophanes seems to say to men that, while they can no longer be completely happy, they can indeed still be men.

---

[218] Or cloven, parted; *diaschisthësómetha*. The word is a kind of intermediate term between the original cut (*diatemô*) and the later dispersal (*diökísthëmen*).

---------- * ---------- * ----------

Aristophanes prefaced his eulogy by stating that he would speak in a somewhat different vein from the way in which Pausanius and Eryximachus had spoken (189c). He thus established a break from these preceding eulogies. He did not, however, say the same thing about Phaedrus. He thus signalled that it was possible that he would speak in a somewhat similar vein to the way in which Phaedrus spoke. As Phaedrus was the first to speak, this would make Aristophanes' speech a kind of 'return to the beginning'. As I have argued, Phaedrus' speech corresponds to the first city, wherein the laws are accepted in an unquestioning fashion, which they could only be if they are seen as unequivocally good. This in turn requires that they be understood to come from gods, or god-like men, or at least men who were closer to the gods than those of the present. This first city must actually be good in some sense, for it at least exists as a unified whole, and is, therefore, a city which is animated by a viable principle of justice. Aristophanes' speech, as a 'return to the beginning', would then be a return to the origin of politics, which is, as it turns out, also a return to political health.

The gods are the key to the return to political health. The return to political health is necessary because politics have become sick in the interim between their origin and the present day. The 'political story' of *Symposium* provides an analysis of exactly how this happened. Because the people of the first city were unreflective about law and authority, they were especially vulnerable to people who were reflective about them, people like Pausanius. Succumbing to this vulnerability, the first city devolved into the city which someone like Pausanius engenders: the city characterized by an awareness of the artificial or manmade character of convention and the laws. This implies of course an awareness of the manmade character of the gods. Whereas in the first city the good is equated with the ancestral, in the devolved city the good is equated with pleasure. The approach to the laws in this city is motivated by the calculus of 'rational self-interest', and the good from which this calculus takes its bearings is personal pleasure. But because the political good can plausibly be stated only as the general good, political debate in this city tends to be sophistical. Eryximachus also ultimately understood the good as pleasure. He represented a further devolution of the city, but this time it occurs through a *techne* that serves above all else the needs of the body, and hence is guided by pleasure. Eryximachus presents a technical and materialistic understanding of erotic man and eros generally. In bringing Pausanius' speech to its end or *telos* (cf. 186a), his speech shows that hedonism issues in materialism. Because his understanding of eros is materialistic, it provides an intellectual framework wherein there is no place for man as man, rather than man as matter. Moreover, because it attributes fundamental reality to body rather than soul, there is no place for the gods in it either. Because of this, it is inherently amoral and contra politics. Between them, Pausanius and Eryximachus represent the two roots to which virtually all political sickness can be traced: sophistry and hedonism, especially carnal hedonism.

Aristophanes tries to effect a return to political health by rehabilitating the gods. It is important to see that this effort is much more than a facile exercise in pious moralism, for his strategy is to show us why we need the gods in order to attain such happiness as is open to us, and to live as human beings. In taking us back to the origins of our humanity, he shows us how the gods are inseparable from distinctly human eros, and hence from human nature. This state of affairs is encapsulated mythically by the fact that our eros is only introduced in Aristophanes' *mythos* at the point where the development to our current human form has been completed (191c-d), and the gods are of course directly responsible for this development (190c-191c).

But in trying to rehabilitate the gods, he seems to misunderstand why they declined in the first place. It was convenient to characterize Aristophanes' eulogy to eros as steering a kind of middle course between Pausanius and Eryximachus, and thus avoiding the errors of each.[219] Aristophanes certainly did avoid their errors, but he never directly responded to either of them, as for example by taking issue with or elaborating on points made in them. It is more accurate to say that he simply forgot them, and began anew, offering an alternative account. His new beginning shows the political need for gods, and how essential they are to our humanity. It accordingly attempts a rehabilitation of politics through poetry that is finally a poetic rehabilitation of the gods.

---

[219] See pp. 160-161 above.

His poetic speech is an appeal for piety. The problem is that, whereas the rationale that supports his poetic appeal for piety is compelling, his speech does not thereby actually compel piety. *Mythoi* may have formed an adequate basis for the gods in the original city represented by Phaedrus' speech, but in the interim between then and now too many Pausaniuses and Eryximachuses have been introduced into the city, and they destroy the mythical sensibility. Pausanius points to the artificial and manmade character of the laws, and Eryximachus points to the reality of what is not manmade: a materialistic mechanistic world. Both of these things argue against the city, mainly by undercutting support for its gods. One might be able to convince Pausanius and Eryximachus of the need for piety, but that is not the same as to make them actually pious. It is almost as though the politically astute poet has forgotten the political reality of Pausanius and Eryximachus. Plato seems to level this criticism against Aristophanes: although his poetry contains great political insight and is indeed intended to elevate politics, it does not have sufficient force and effect to accomplish this objective in a really meaningful way. Any attempted rehabilitation of politics through the rehabilitation of the gods must address sophisticated and educated men like Pausanius and Eryximachus if it is to succeed. To state the problem succinctly: Aristophanes' *mythos* teaches that poetic beauty (manifested most clearly in the portrayal of the gods) is essential to the constitution of the city, and that this beauty is essentially limiting in character, but it is by no means clear that men like Pausanius and Eryximachus could ever be so charmed by poetic beauty as actually to be limited by it.

Perhaps then a rehabilitation of politics through a philosophical rather than a poetical rehabilitation of the gods could appeal to Pausanius and Eryximachus; perhaps Socrates, rather than Aristophanes, can rehabilitate the gods. We have to wait for Socrates' eulogy to find out. In the interim, Plato explores another possible avenue of return to political health: perhaps if the existing gods cannot be rehabilitated, novel ones can be created. The novel poet Agathon, who speaks next, will create a novel god.

8 Agathon

> *Beauty is as summer fruits, which are easy to corrupt, and cannot last: and for the most part it makes a dissolute youth, and an age a little out of countenance: but yet certainly again, if it light well, it maketh virtues shine, and vices blush.*
>
> *(Francis Bacon* "Of Beauty" *Essay 43)*

Before the tragic poet Agathon speaks, we are treated to repartee similar to that which preceded the eulogy of the comic poet Aristophanes. In that first bit of repartee, Eryximachus played the part of the city, and it encapsulated the interaction of city and comic poet as regards the comic poet's ability to "hit and run", i.e., his power to attack the city with seeming impunity.[220] In this latter bit of repartee, Eryximachus again plays the part of the city, and it encapsulates the interaction of city and tragic poet as regards the city's expectations of the tragic poet. This latter differs from the preceding one in that the philosopher Socrates is now included. Eryximachus states his expectation that Socrates and Agathon will be able to find something to say even given the fullness and variety of what has already been said (193e). He thus associates them with each other.[221] Are the city's expectations of tragic poet and philosopher in any way similar?[222]

---

[220] See .pp 106-108 and 154-157 above.

[221] Of course, it could be said that this is merely a necessary consequence of the fact that they are the last two encomiasts of the evening, as determined by the order in which they sit (see Appendix). But the seating arrangement is part of Plato's overall dramatic design of the dialogue, and bears directly on its interpretation. We have already seen how it is used in elucidating the relationship between city and comic poet. The physical closeness of Socrates and Agathon as determined by the seating arrangement is connected to the strange fact that in this dialogue no one is closer to Socrates than Agathon. Within the drama of the dialogue, the seating arrangement is, as I have argued, of Agathon's design (see pp 22-23 above): he wants to be close to Socrates. Moreover, we have reason to suspect that he has engineered this evening of eulogies to eros in order to impress him. Socrates, for his part, professes to want to sing Agathon's praises (222e-a), and twice tries to engage him and only him in the sort of dialogue that is characteristic of Socrates (194a-d and 199c-201d). The latter effort is successful, and is the only instance of such dialogue in *Symposium.*

[222] As we might expect, given the popular tradition that Socrates ghost-wrote the plays of Euripides:

> That Socrates was closely related to the tendency of Euripides did not escape escape the notice of contemporaneous antiquity. The most eloquent expression of this felitious insight was the story current in Athens that Socrates used to help Euripides write his plays. (Nietzsche *Birth of Tragedy* sec. 13)

The expectations of the city have the effect of putting pressure on both the tragic poet and the philosopher to produce speeches that are novel. Things that have been said and heard already are not generally 'interesting', irrespective of whatever their inherent worth might be. Whereas that which is new and varied – not only stories and songs, jokes and speeches, but also doctrines, ideas, perspectives or whatever – may be attractive to the city simply because new and varied.[223] The city wants to be entertained. It is confident that the poet and philosopher will be able to produce new and varied speeches, speeches that are new and varied even though it seems as though everything has already been said. This confidence is in the nature of a hope or a wish: if the poets and philosophers cannot produce the new and varied, then no one can. And its expression has the character of a command. Poets and philosophers cannot help but understand what is expected of them. In the event, this expectation is fully justified, for neither disappoints: Agathon is the maestro of the new and varied,[224] and (ironically) Socrates ends up saying something novel because he is the first to dedicate himself to what is truly praiseworthy about eros (198d).[225]

The philosopher Socrates deals with the city's expectations by trying to dampen them. Socrates addresses Eryximachus' confident expectations by trying to shift them off of himself:

> That is because you yourself contested beautifully, Eryximachus; but if you were where I am now, or rather where it's likely I shall be when Agathon has spoken, then you would be right well afraid and as wholly baffled as I am now. (193e-a)

Socrates joins with Eryximachus in the expectation that Agathon will put on a beautiful show, but he demurs as to his own ability to do likewise. He does so in the philosophical fashion: ironically, and the irony here is amusing. He seems to say that he is afraid to speak after everyone else, and that he is baffled as to what to say because of all that has already been said. But as for the fear, what he actually says is that Eryximachus would be afraid if he were in his shoes. And as for the bafflement, he may really be baffled, not necessarily because the previous speeches have left him nothing else to say; he may be baffled simply because he is unsure why people spoke as they did – or, how to counter what is false in their speeches while preserving what is true. As he will make clear in prefacing his own eulogy, he thought that in eulogizing eros he had to tell the truth about it; he could be selective in choosing and arranging the parts of the truth to speak about, and in particular, he could choose the most beautiful parts, and so present it in the best possible light, yet he still thought he had to tell the truth about it (198d).[226] He has discovered, however, that no one else thought the same, that everyone else heaped praises on eros regardless of whether they were true or not: "And if the praise were false, it was of no importance; for the injunction was, it seems, *that each of us should be thought to eulogize Eros*, and not just to eulogize Eros" (my italics, 198e). If one eulogizes something without confining himself to what is true about it, then one is not actually eulogizing that thing. What is the point of that? Here indeed is a problem that could baffle for a long time: why would anyone want to be thought to eulogize eros, but not actually do so? Doubtless most of the audience misses the irony of what Socrates says before Agathon speaks, but the rhetorical force of what he says is not lost on anyone: he heightens expectations for Agathon's eulogy and lowers them for himself. In this way he minimizes the pressure that the city's expectations might bring to bear on him and philosophy.

---

[223] The problem with this is that there is no necessary connection between novelty, or 'originality', and intellectual value or merit. This is *especially* true when the object of intellectual inquiry is political. The new and varied captures our interest because it intrigues, stimulates and refreshes. But inasmuch as what is new and varied is apt to be contra the old and established order of the city, the natural human attraction to it constitutes a natural force for political disintegration.

[224] See Aristotle *Poetics* for a discussion of some of his innovations (1451a36-1451b27 and 1456a19-1456a33).

[225] The truth seems novel to the city, and hence it can be rendered (to at least part of the city, cf. 212c) in an entertaining fashion.

Obversely, his rhetoric maximizes the pressure on Agathon. Higher expectations are harder to meet, hence more likely to be disappointed. For anyone concerned with making a good impression, the possibility of disappointing is distressing. Agathon responds:

> You want to bewitch me, Socrates. You would have me believe that the theatre [or 'audience'; *théatron*] is full of expectation that I shall speak well, and in that way I shall be flustered. (194a)

But Socrates openly doubts that Agathon is actually distressed about the possibility of disappointing his audience. There are three reasons why one of whom there were high expectations would not be distressed by the possibility of disappointing them: first, confidence in being equal to them; second, a lack of concern about the people who hold them; and third, a lack of concern about the expectations themselves. Socrates tells Agathon that he is certain that he is indeed confident, for he saw him winning the victory at the tragedy competition, the very victory that is now being celebrated at this party. At that competition, he says, Agathon showed "courage and great mind" (*andreían kai megalophrosúnēn*) in displaying his speeches before a large theatre. So, Socrates wonders, why then should he now be disturbed to speak in front of the few human beings at this party? Agathon responds:

---

[226] But not necessarily the whole truth, notice.

> What's this, Socrates? You really do not believe that I am so wrapped up in the theatre as not to know that to one with mind a few who are sensible are more terrifying than many without sense? (194b)

Agathon's response shows that the real reason for his aplomb at the competition is his low regard for the many. In a way, his point would seem to be well taken, for it is not wise to be wrapped up in the expectations of people with no sense, and the fact that there are *many* without sense does not, in and of itself, make their expectations any more important (cf. *Crito*, 46c-48a).

But the relationship between the wise and the many is not so simple, and Agathon fails to see this because of his dismissive attitude towards the many. Socrates perceives this about him and tries to draw him into a consideration of how he stands to the many and the consequences of this stance. As his eulogy will make clear, Agathon thinks himself wise by virtue of his success as a poet. Notwithstanding his contempt for the many, his claim to be wise actually rests on their endorsement. Because he thinks himself wise, he probably assumes a certain affinity between himself and wise men such as Socrates. Socrates has no doubt that if Agathon were to meet any who he believed to be wise, he would think more of them than the many, but he does seem to doubt that Agathon is competent actually to recognize the wise. It is not easy to do so; certainly, the wise do not necessarily appear beautiful, nor the foolish ugly, as the juxtaposition of Socrates and Agathon reminds us.[227] For, in fact, they look much like the many, and like the many, they too appear in the theatre: "But I suspect that we shall not be of the wise, for we too were present there and were part of the many" (194c). The wise few will always be mingled among the many unwise, for the wise, like the many, have bodies. This creates an inescapable commonality between the wise and the many that is foolish to ignore, and we have seen that it is one of the virtues of Aristophanes' poetry that it wisely insists upon the importance of bodies. Agathon's foolishness leads him into immorality. Socrates asks him if he were to do something he believed to be disgraceful in the presence of the wise, would he feel ashamed before them? Agathon responds that, yes, indeed he would. This is because he has a high regard for the wise. But the implication of this rationale is that if he were to do something disgraceful in the presence of those he has low regard for, such as the many, he might not feel comparably ashamed. He does not feel shame before anyone he thinks himself superior to, and as he feels himself generally superior, this means that even if he did shameful things regularly he would hardly ever feel shame.[228] Socrates' next question (194d) would make this implication embarrassingly clear, but fortunately for Agathon, he is saved from the discomfort of having to answer it by the intervention of Phaedrus, who halts the question and answer exchange between them, and insists on Agathon's giving a eulogy to Eros in accordance with the rule that they have all agreed upon. His enforcement of the convention in the case of Agathon contrasts with his subsequent silence as regards Alcibiades' violation of *Symposium's* conventions.

---

[227] And, perhaps, as they would, were nature more able to make nobility of soul apparent (cf. Aristotle *Politics* 1254b27-1254b39).

---------- * ---------- * ----------

Agathon prefaces his speech with a comment on how he must speak: "For it seems to me all the previous speakers did not eulogize the god but blessed human beings for the goods of which the god is the cause" (194e.) Whereas he will be the first to speak about the god himself. The previous speakers, he says, have not actually eulogized Eros, but rather his good effects. There is a sense in which his point is well taken: Phaedrus eulogized mainly the heroism that Eros instils in lovers; Pausanius eulogized the role of the noble Eros in the development and education of the youth, and generally in endowing the city with grace and refinement; Eryximachus eulogized the idea that technical knowledge of Eros is what allows man to control his environment for his own benefit and pleasure; and Aristophanes eulogized the healing power of Eros for the human illness of division. In focusing on the effects of Eros, might not the previous speakers have missed the thing itself? Agathon implies that in addressing this deficiency, his own eulogy will come closer to the truth of eros than previous ones. But in all fairness to the previous eulogizers, the *truth* about eros is not the primary issue of the evening. We have to remind ourselves here that the ostensible point of the eulogies to eros is not to account for eros, but rather to praise it (177d). Bearing this in mind, one may wonder what really motivates Agathon's criticism of the previous eulogizers. His own eulogy taken as a whole could hardly be said to provide evidence of any greater concern for the truth about eros than the previous eulogizers. Is his criticism then perhaps intended to impress one who might actually be interested in the truth about eros? Such an interest sounds distinctly philosophical, and there is of course a philosopher present in the audience, one who expressly claims expertise in erotic matters (178d). Could it be that Agathon begins as he does in an effort to draw the praise of Socrates? Certain it is that he is eager for it (e.g., 223a).

---

[228] 'Feeling shame' is for Agathon, as it is for most of us, in part a function of being observed. But one senses that Agathon has no 'internal' sense of shame, or that his shame is entirely 'political'. This phenomenon first arose in Phaedrus' speech, where eros intensified the feeling of shame or honour that a lover/beloved feels in being observed be his lover/beloved in a shameful or noble deed (178c-a). I will have more to say about this matter below.

However that may be, Agathon's stated intention is that, whereas the previous eulogizers eulogized the effects of Eros, he will actually eulogize the god himself. The way that he will do this will ostensibly be guided by the following general principle of praise:

> There is one proper manner in praise of anything: to tell in speech – whomever the speech happens to be about – what sort he is and what sort of things he causes. This is just the way for us too to praise Eros – first what sort he is, and then his gifts. (195a)

According to Agathon, then, the issue that the previous eulogizers have addressed – the *effects* of eros – is actually a secondary issue; the primary issue in the praise of anything is *what sort* of thing it is.[229]

---

[229] His general principle of praise seems to beg comparison with the other general principle of praise enunciated in the dialogue, that of Socrates:

> I believed the truth had to be told about anything that was given a eulogy, and that

The problem with Agathon's eulogy is that he is not able to follow through on his own stated intention, and this inability is a necessary consequence of the fact that, as Socrates' questioning of Agathon subsequent to his eulogy will make embarrassingly clear, he does not actually know anything of the truth about eros (201b). To exaggerate for the sake of clarity, his eulogy is all beauty (cf. 198b) and no truth. Yet it is still universally appealing (198a). This tells us something about our erotic natures: we are all naturally attracted to the beautiful. In contrast to the reception Agathon's eulogy receives, Socrates' speech, which is more truthful and less beautiful (199a-b), is only praised by some (212c); whereas we are all naturally attracted to the beautiful, we are not all naturally attracted to the truth. This insight has important political implications. If the city is 'truly' eulogized, i.e., if it is eulogized by praising the parts of the truth about the city that are truly beautiful, then it could attract the allegiance of only some citizens. The city could only be expected to attract the allegiance of all its citizens to the extent that it could be convincingly presented as simply beautiful, i.e., as something that it is not. There are political reasons why someone might want to appear, rather than actually, to eulogize something.

Agathon declares: "though all the gods are happy, Eros (if sacred law allow it and it be without nemesis to say so) is the happiest of them, as he is the most beautiful and the best [*kálliston ónta kaì áriston*]" (195a). He would not attach the pious caveat to this declaration unless there was some likelihood that it was true, and indeed it would seem against sacred law to say Eros is the happiest god, for Eros is not part of the Greek pantheon. In fact, the Eros that Agathon eulogizes is entirely of his own devising. To

---

> this was the underpinning, and that by selecting the most beautiful parts of the truth one was to arrange them in the seemliest manner. (198d)

Socrates' principle emphasizes the truth. But the truth is actually implicit or assumed in Agathon's principle (and indeed in every act of praise): no thing is properly praised by describing it as being the sort of thing that it is not, or by attributing to it the ability to cause effects that it does not in part at least actually cause. The truth is essential even if for no other reason than without it, the praise is irrelevant to the thing ostensibly being praised (198e-a). And if this is generally recognized to be so, such a eulogy becomes an ironic caricature, if not something worse.

Given Socrates' strong endorsement of Agathon's stated strategy for praising Eros (199c), it seems as though he sees merit in it. He in fact follows Agathon's stated order of priority in praise, addressing first what sort of thing eros is (199d-204c), and then what sort of things he causes for human beings (204c-212a). Cf. *Gorgias* 448d-449a.

claim that this Eros is the best and most beautiful of the gods is actually a remarkable piece of hubris. The promotion of this hubris can only undercut the pantheon and hence the importance of the laws of the city, insofar as they are divinely sanctioned by its gods. The tragedian Agathon is an innovator, as poets tend to be, and his eulogy points to the politically disturbing consequences of novelty, especially the introduction of novel gods, and thus of poetry which is not effectively superintended by political authority.

Agathon pursues the connection between eros and happiness that Aristophanes first made explicit. For Agathon, Eros must be most happy because he is most beautiful and best. Happiness consists in being beautiful and good, and the body of his eulogy to Eros is simply an adumbration of various ways in which Eros is beautiful and good. He adumbrates four attributes of its beauty and four of its goodness. The body of his eulogy is thus 'balanced' or 'symmetrical'. According to Agathon, the "harmony of [Eros'] figure is a great piece of evidence for his proportioned [or symmetrical; *summétrou*] and pliant look" (196a). Symmetry is an element of beauty as Agathon understands it, something that makes particular things beautiful. It is a 'technical' element of the arts of poetry and rhetoric, or a 'technique' that one learns to beautify poetry and rhetoric. Agathon is a poet 'by art' (cf. 223d), rather than by inspiration or divine madness (cf. *Phaedrus* 245a). He intends his eulogy to Eros as a display of his skill with poetry and rhetoric. As we shall see, the goodness of Eros consists in its virtue, and Agathon will attribute four cardinal virtues to him. He thus needs four beautiful attributes of Eros in order to make the body of his eulogy symmetrical, which is exactly what he produces. Agathon's rhetorical argument has been constructed by him with a view to its symmetry and hence to its beauty. He does this because the beauty of his eulogy is for him its most important feature. The reader, however, should consider whether the beautiful attributes actually correspond to the virtues in some substantial way.

As Socrates' subsequent questioning of Agathon will make clear, he tacitly assumes that the good and the beautiful naturally cohere (201c-b). It is by no means certain that this is true. But there is a larger problem with his attributing the happiness of Eros to its beauty and goodness (virtue), for he never explains why or how there is a connection between either beauty or goodness (virtue) and happiness. In effect, he treats as self-evident that beauty and goodness (virtue) are each necessary and together sufficient conditions of happiness – but he especially emphasizes beauty. By contrast, when Diotima asks Socrates, "What will he have who gets the beautiful things?" Socrates is incapable of answering; but when the question is changed to the good instead, Socrates is able to answer readily: he who gets the good things will be happy (204d-e). Apparently, then, whereas it is obvious to Socrates that the possession of good things makes one happy, it is not at all clear what the benefit of the possession of beautiful things is. But even if we could grant that the possession of beautiful things leads to happiness, that still leaves as a mystery the benefit of actually *being* beautiful. If indeed *having* a beautiful beloved makes a lover happy, would he not enjoy this beauty irrespective of whether he was himself beautiful or ugly? We could say that actually *being* beautiful attracts lovers, or money, or political power, or honour (i.e., admiration), or whatever (cf. 184a-b), which make us happy, but then the benefit is extrinsic to the beauty: if we could get those things without being beautiful, we would presumably be just as happy. So we wonder: is *being* beautiful merely useful?

But Agathon ignores such problems and proceeds directly to explicate the beauty of Eros. Although the treatment is inadequate, it is a virtue of Agathon's speech that he is the first eulogizer explicitly to raise beauty as a theme, and to make an explicit connection between beauty and eros. His treatment is necessarily inadequate because he tacitly uses himself as the model of beauty. He asserts that the supreme beauty of the god Eros is apparent most importantly, although not exclusively, in the following four qualities: his youth, his tenderness, his pliancy, and his blooming complexion (195a-196b). This is nothing more than an idealized presentation of himself. Agathon would be god; more specifically, the very god of love. What he wants from the theatre is to be worshipped.[230]

---

[230] This psychic impulse in the poet perhaps is indicative of the true origin of the gods. In *Apology of Socrates*, Socrates speaks of questioning the poets in his effort to disprove the oracle at Delphi that "no one was wiser" than Socrates (21a). The poets are the second and central group of men Socrates examines in this effort, and the only group of which he says he was 'ashamed' to tell the truth (22b). He never explains why he was ashamed, but perhaps his shame is accounted for here. The stories of the gods had to come from somewhere, and if they did not come from the gods themselves, then someone must have made them up. To be compelling, these stories had to be beautiful, and it is the business of poets to make beautiful stories.

Eros is most beautiful in respect, first, of his youth: he is the youngest of all the gods. The proof of this is that Eros "with headlong flight" avoids old age (195b). This is good rhetoric; it almost sounds as though praying at the altar of Eros, or 'being erotic', somehow keeps one young. And the nearly universal appeal of the promise of eternal youth shows us how powerfully attractive the bloom of youth really is. Yet Agathon cannot and does not claim that Eros actually *overcomes* old age. Even if it is true that Eros detests old age, and stays as far away from it as possible, we nonetheless all naturally grow old, decay and in the end die. Eros is presumably then the god of the young, a god whose favour we all lose as we grow old. Eros thus can only be the pre-eminent god if youth is the pre-eminent age. This is indeed Agathon's point:

> I do not agree that Eros is more ancient than Kronos and Iapetos; but I affirm his being the youngest of the gods and ever young. And the events of old about gods of which Hesiod[231] and Parmenidies speak belong to Necessity and not to Eros,[232] if what they say is true. Otherwise there would not have been castrations and bindings of each other, and many other acts of violence among the gods, had Eros been among them; but there would have been friendship and peace, just as there is now, since Eros became king of the gods. (195b-c)

All the ugly things in life derive from what is old. The 'golden age' for Agathon is the age of youth; it was not until youthful Eros came on to the scene that all was set well. But one also reads in Hesiod that Kronos was king of the 'golden age', which was the first and hence the oldest human age, an ancient time when life was easy and otherwise 'ideal'.[233] Agathon is evidently selective in his use of Hesiod, emphasizing the horrible acts of violence associated with Kronos' reign to the neglect of its beneficence. If it is true that the castrations and bindings and so on of ancient times did indeed occur, Agathon says, then they must have occurred when Necessity, which is old, ruled the gods and before Eros.[234] He implies that Eros, and so too the young, are free from necessity, and that if we are free, all is friendship and peace. Youth should be venerated, for it frees humans from the old and established orders, which are imposed orders of harshness.

---

[231] E.g., *Theogony* 132-210, 453-506 and 617-819.

[232] He contrasts eros and necessity, but they may not be so alien as he implies. In *Republic*, Glaucon is evidently impressed by the force of 'erotic necessities', which he observes are for most people more compelling than geometrical necessities (*Republic*, 458d).

[233] *Works and Days*, 109-26. Socrates more often than not venerates olden times or ages (e.g., *Minos*, 318b ff.).

[234] This does not make much sense, for how could we understand castrations in an unerotic world? He actually inadvertently emphasizes the erotic character of the cruelty, for castrations have a special cruelty precisely in light of our erotic natures.

There are obviously problems with this argument. His promotion of his novel Eros is, in effect, the promotion of youth-worship, and this is politically disintegrating. The traditional and evidently most sensible political arrangement of the young and the old is that the older rule and the younger be ruled (cf. *Republic*, 412c), for the older generally have more sense and practical experience in the affairs of the city. But Agathon's veneration of youth derogates from this natural order. Moreover, there is a problem with his basic line of argument concerning the youth of Eros. His proof for it is that Eros avoids old age, and that he is "always with and of the young" (195b). He evidently understands eros in terms of the pederastic principle of 'like to like'. But this will not do. One who is old can love the young, as the case of Socrates – who even as an old man, was frequently with the young – reminds us. In fact, the truth seems to be that the young and the old are united in this very thing: that both are naturally attracted to the bloom of youth. Youthfulness, together with tenderness, suppleness and a blooming complexion are actually idealized qualities of the beloved. And they are, as I observed above, likewise idealized qualities of Agathon himself; he sees himself as the beloved. In rendering the god in his own image, he is thus driven to render it beloved. What really underlies his claim for the youth and so on of Eros is that he actually equates Eros with the beloved. But it is surely a mistake to do so (cf. 204c), for this is as much as to say that love is the thing loved.

To demonstrate the tenderness of Eros, Agathon draws on Homer's description of the goddess Ate:

> Tender are her feet, for she does not on the threshold
> Draw near, but lo! she walks on the heads of men.

Homer's evidence for the tenderness of Ate is that she walks on the soft rather than the hard. Eros, Agathon says, must be softer still, for he walks on what is softer than heads, the soft souls of soft men (195d-e).[235] This poetical comparison seems to make his point beautifully, but a further point, which he does not intend, emerges if one considers the full context from which the above quote is drawn (*Iliad*, 19.1-94). In brief, this is the scene in *Iliad* in which Achilles and Agamemnon are reconciled. Achilles has been spurred by the encouragement of his mother and the death of his beloved, Patroclus, to rejoin the fighting after a bitter period of abstinence. His abstinence was brought about by his wrath at Agamemnon for having deprived him of his rightful war prize, the girl Briseis. Agamemnon explains that he deprived Achilles of her because the goddess Ate (delusion), made him do it. Ate is a kind of curse Zeus visits on men. She does this by making men infatuated and distracted, causing them to act irrationally. She walks softly above their heads, leading them astray and typically to their ruin. Ate made Agamemnon anger Achilles and thus lead the Achaians to the brink of utter defeat and ruin. If tender Ate leads men astray, might we not expect that the even more tender Eros would lead them further astray? Fully thought through – as Agathon has not done – the

---

[235] The comparison of Eros to Ate, whose tenderness is illustrated through the tenderness of her feet, calls to mind the typically barefoot man (cf. 174a, 220b), Socrates, whose feet must for that very reason be hard and calloused. The character of Socrates is

---

pertinent to Agathon's entire discussion of the beauty of Eros. Socrates as he usually appears is the very personification of Eros as Diotima describes him (203c-e), a tough and hard Eros. This would seem to argue against the truth of Agathon's presentation of a 'soft' Eros. Socrates, like Agathon's 'soft' Eros, often walks on the souls of men, which is what we see him doing in the dialogues of the Platonic corpus. But, unlike Agathon's soft Eros, since he traipses on them with hard and smelly feet, he is not generally "unobserved on first entering or on departing from every soul" (196a). To have one's soul 'walked on' by Socrates was not always a pleasant experience (and certainly not one which would be unobserved), which is part of the reason why he was condemned to death by the city. On the other hand, however, the very ability that he has to 'enter and depart' from souls, which is on display throughout the dialogues of the Platonic corpus, seems to require a certain 'softness' or 'pliancy'. The 'soft' side of Socrates' eros is especially evident in how he handles children, as for example in Plato's *Laches* and *Theages*. Hence the 'soft' eros of Agathon must indeed capture a part of the truth about eros. Philosophy is a synthesis of 'hard' and 'soft' eros (cf *Republic* 410a-412a).

It is important to note the following implication of the bare feet of Socrates: because of them, he stands directly on the ground, and is thereby 'well-grounded' in *nature*. He has no need of the *art* of the shoemaker. The art of the shoemaker is one of the arts that comes into being along with the city in Plato's *Republic*, and the shoemaker is one of the four or five men who comprise "the city of utmost necessity" (369b-c). Socrates thus 'stands apart' from the city. The bare feet of Socrates are a symbol of his direct contact with reality, and his ability to commune with nature as it really is rather than as it is mediated by the city. This of course requires a certain amount of 'toughness' or 'hardness', which is the literal implication of the ability to walk barefoot (especially in winter, cf. 220b). But it is important to see that his 'toughness' or 'hardness' is primarily a question of his psychical control over his physical existence.

analogy actually suggests that we think of tender Eros as we think of tender Ate: a curse from the gods, which debilitates the rational soul.

Agathon's third beautiful attribute of Eros is that he is beautiful because he is "pliant [or 'fluid'; *hugrós*] in his form [or 'shape', 'looks'; *tò eîdos*]" (196a). The pliancy of his form means that Eros is soft and supple in his looks, or proportioned and graceful, and it is for this that Agathon means to eulogize him. It is surely to be noted that the word for form here, *eîdos*, is the same as the key word used in the ontology of *Republic*, what is often referred to as Plato's 'theory of forms'. But Agathon uses the word only in the sense of visible appearance. It seems that for Agathon there is no reality beyond the visibly apparent, and that beauty really is (finally) 'skin deep'. The 'form' of Eros adapts or *con*forms to the appearance of whatever (supposedly beautiful) things it meets. Eros has no form of its own. It is imitative, much as is Agathon's art. But then the beauty of Eros is borrowed; it really lies in the beauty of the things it is like. Agathon's beautiful Eros is necessarily insubstantial, much as is Agathon himself, because he cannot explain why Eros itself is beautiful. Of course, it is devilishly difficult to *explain* why anything is actually beautiful, i.e., to account for the reality of beauty. Agathon explains the beauty of Eros in terms of the beautiful things it is like, but then one immediately is driven to ask: and why are these things beautiful? … beautiful in terms of still other things? Agathon's speech actually anticipates Diotima's speech, for without something like her 'form of the beautiful', which explains the beauty of all particular things (210a-212a), explanations for the beauty of particular things are inevitably circular.

The fourth and final thing Agathon mentions in respect of which Eros is beautiful is his complexion:

> The god's way of living among blooming flowers[236] means that his complexion [or 'skin', esp. of the human body, hence its 'appearance' or 'colour'; *chróas*] itself is beautiful; for Eros does not settle on what is fading and has passed its bloom, whether it be body or soul or anything else, but wherever a place is blooming and scented, there he settles and remains. (196a-b)

That the god is beautifully complected is evident inasmuch as it settles and remains among beautifully complected things like flowers in bloom.[237] Again, he implicitly appeals to the erotic principle of 'like to like', but once again, one wonders why what is *not* beautifully complected could not also nonetheless settle among what is: the fact that eros settles and remains among flowers does not make it *ipso facto* like a flower.

---

[236] It should be noted that Agathon wrote a tragedy, no longer extant, called *Flower*. Aristotle speaks of it in his *Poetics* (1451b21).

[237] It is hard to see how this could include souls. Taken as a whole, his description of the

Agathon next turns to the goodness of Eros, which consists in its virtue. He attributes four cardinal virtues to Eros: justice, moderation, courage and wisdom (196-197b).[238] His treatment of the virtue of Eros is somewhat amusing and silly, as he himself seems to acknowledge (197e). One of the serious effects of it, however, is that it causes us to wonder about the relationship between Eros and virtue. Is eros simply the domain of the virtuous? Are not the vicious also erotic? And are not the vicious often attracted to the virtuous, and the latter sometimes to the former? There is considerable evidence suggesting Eros, being attracted to beauty, is rather indifferent to either virtue or vice.

The first virtue that Agathon attributes to Eros is justice. The justice of Eros is evident from the fact that everybody obeys him of their own accord, "and whatever anyone of his own accord agrees upon with another of his own accord, the 'royal laws of the city' declare to be just" (196c). Eros is just because everyone willingly serves it.[239] This picks up a theme he developed with respect to youth, the first beautiful attribute of Eros. There he contrasted eros with necessity, implying that eros is free from necessity.[240] Here he elaborates on this freedom: being free from necessity, eros is in the realm of free will. Everyone willingly obeys Eros. But the idea of what people 'willingly' do gets very complicated in the context of erotic considerations. I have already noted how compelling erotic necessities can be for people. In *Republic*, Eros comes to view as the complete tyrant because it enslaves man, leaving him less able to exercise the freedom of his rational soul (e.g., *Republic*, 329c, 402e-a, 572e-573e). If

---

beauty of Eros seems to refer to bodily beauty. His real concern is with body, again 'skin-deep' beauty.

[238] Conspicuous by its absence is piety. As I have observed, Agathon prefers the new and young to the traditional and old, and is a theistic innovator. The absence of piety is explained by the fact that he is impious.

[239] Hence the justice of the rule is established by the consent of those who are ruled, a principle familiar to modern democrats. Agathon's discussion of justice invites consideration of the psychological basis of this principle.

[240] See n. 232, p. 207 above.

this is true, then it would completely undercut Agathon's point here. Agathon associates justice with free-will, with the ability to make a choice,[241] but if eros actually impedes this ability, then it would instead come to view as *the* problem for justice, as it does in *Republic*.

In any event, the politics of this poet who depends for his livelihood on the democratic city are clearly in evidence here. Agreement in the assembly establishes the laws of the democratic city, which it declares to be just; agreement thus establishes justice. But the laws of the city are often hard, even if just. And they are always upheld by coercive force. The justice of Eros is not actually consistent with the softness of Eros. In order to deal with this problem, he softens justice:

> The greatest thing is that Eros neither commits injustice, nor has injustice done to him, neither against a god nor by a god, neither against a human being nor by a human being. For it is not by violence that Eros is affected, if he is affected at all – for violence does not touch him;[242] nor does he act with violence, for everyone of his own accord serves Eros in everything. (196b-c)

He implicitly equates violence with injustice, as though there were no non-violent ways to inflict an injustice upon someone, or no violence in the service of justice. Eros is free from violence because everyone voluntarily serves him in everything,[243] hence he is free from injustice. For Eros to be voluntarily served in everything would seem to require subjects that love him: Eros can be soft and rule with justice only if he is unaffected by violence, and this is only possible if he is loved. Once again, Eros ends up being the beloved. There is a teaching here about how rulers and ruled in democracies relate to each other: to be effective, the ruler does not necessarily need to love the people, but he must be loved by them.

---

[241] It is hard to imagine what 'total' free-will, the exercise of choice which is in no way impeded by any necessary constraints, would really amount to. It could be that some sort of necessity is actually a precondition of meaningful freedom. Agathon, a democrat after the fashion of his lover Pausanius (see pp 68-68 above), assumes that freedom is simply beautiful and good. But in excess, Socrates notes in *Republic*, it can be harmful: "Too much freedom seems to change into nothing but too much slavery, both for private man and city" (*Republic*, 564a).

[242] Yet apparently this does not mean that he is at peace: "for lack of harmony and Eros are always at war with one another" (196a) The implication is either that there are non-violent forms of war, or he is confused.

[243] But we are reminded of the close connection between eros and violence by the most famous war of antiquity, as depicted in Homer's *Iliad*, which was fought for nothing more (or less) than the love of Helen.

Agathon next turns to the moderation of Eros. He is moderate because he dominates all other pleasures and desires, and to be moderate means to dominate the pleasures and desires (196c).[244] This is of course a silly argument; the issue is whether a person can dominate and hence control the pleasures and desires (cf. *Republic*, 430e-a). If one pleasure or desire dominates the others, then the person who experiences it is not therefore moderate. In fact, so far from making him moderate, it would rather tend to make him maniacal. There is, however, a serious issue to which his argument points, for the person who experiences one dominant pleasure or desire may nonetheless *appear* to be moderate to an observer. This is because the experience of a dominant pleasure or desire may impose a kind of order on one's life. In particular, the lover of wisdom is a lover of learning and one who would be "concerned with the pleasure of the soul itself with respect to itself and would forsake those pleasures that come through the body" (*Republic*, 485d). Because he is uninterested in the things that most desire, he appears to have remarkable self-control in the presence of them, and hence to be moderate. But this is only an apparent moderation, or 'moderation by default': with respect to the pleasure that he actually cares about, he is most immoderate.

Agathon has a very similar argument for the courage of Eros. He dominates even the war god, for Ares loves Aphrodite and is hence possessed by Eros. And "he who possesses is stronger than he who is possessed; and in dominating the bravest of all the rest, he must be the bravest" (196d). In dominating Ares, he implies, Eros must therefore be the bravest. But this does not follow, for the brave can be dominated by the less brave, as when a strong lover is ruled by a weak beloved, such as is the case with Ares' love of Aphrodite. His argument brings to our attention the fact that the nature of strength in an erotic world differs greatly from the nature of strength in an unerotic world. This of course has sweeping political implications, for – as we saw in

---

[244] Whereas Eros is just because consensual rather than dominating, he is moderate because dominating rather than consensual. This result is amusing given the close relationship between the two virtues.

Aristophanes' eulogy – the city is bound together by various erotic ties. Those who would *appear* to be strong in the city may not in fact rule the city.

The fourth and final virtue Agathon attributes to Eros is wisdom. He spends the most time and effort on this virtue (as much as the preceding three combined) because he especially wants to demonstrate his own wisdom. Once again, he seeks to present the god in such a way as to liken him to himself. According to Agathon, Eros is a wise poet:

> the god is a poet (or maker; *poiëtës*) of such wisdom that he can make poets of others too; at any rate, everyone whom Eros touches proves to be a poet, 'though he be without the Muses before'. (196e)

Wisdom is displayed, hence proven, in making or creation. Eros is responsible for this wisdom, for even the prosaic become poetic once they have been inspired by Eros. The nine Muses are traditionally the goddesses upon whom poets, but also all other intellectuals who create, including philosophers, depend for their ability to create.[245] His point seems to be that Eros introduces to us the Muses, and that without him they will not come. They are his possessions:

> We can, accordingly, properly make use of this fact to infer that in every kind of musical making [i.e., poetry] Eros is a good poet [maker]; for what one does not have and does not know, one could neither give to another nor teach to another. (196e-a)

But as Socrates argues, teaching is not best thought of as imparting knowledge; it is more precisely helping students to see what they already have the power to see, and hence one need not actually have 'a piece of' knowledge in order to teach it to another (cf. *Republic*, 518b-d). Agathon's argument actually points to the difference between teaching and the dissemination of information.

Socrates' conception of teaching implies that there is actually something to be seen. For him, wisdom is apparently a matter of contemplation, rather than making, and this requires something that can be known. The contrast between him and Agathon causes us to wonder about wisdom. Agathon continues: "And who will oppose the fact that the making of all animals is nothing but Eros' wisdom, by which all the animals come to be and grow" (197a). The animals are hardly wise, but if wisdom is creation, then there must be wisdom in their obviously erotic creation. But what sort of wisdom is it, and, to use Agathon's language, *whose* wisdom is it? To rephrase, is wisdom inherent in nature, and do all the things that come to be and grow do so by the wisdom of nature? Philosophy can be said to be born in the awareness of a distinction between nature and convention, and that one can appeal from convention to nature in order to evaluate all conventions.[246] When we contemplate nature in an effort to do this, are we attempting to make our minds conform to the wisdom at large in nature, or is the wisdom that comes from the contemplation of nature something entirely in our minds, the thing by means of which we make sense of nature?

---

[245] Simon and Hornblower, 1002.

Agathon finishes his discussion of the wisdom of Eros with a discussion of the arts (197a-b). Eros inspires the arts, as it does poetry, and is the teacher of them. All the arts, and in particular the seven that he mentions (archery, medicine, divination, music, blacksmithing, weaving, and political rule), are marks of civilization. The central art, music, makes possible the musical education by means of which a civilization is cultivated. The arts elevate man, and increase his human potential. There is no mention of any human beings in his discussion of the arts, but only five Olympian gods (Apollo, the Muses, Hephaestus, Athena and Zeus). The central god is Hephaestus, who is *the* artisan god. It seems as though the single most important thing about the Olympian gods is that they introduce us to the civilizing arts. And the civilizing arts were invented by the gods under the guidance of wise Eros.

Agathon seeks to display the magnificence of his own wisdom by creating a eulogy that is so beautiful it stupefies. In that way his wisdom will be beyond question. And so he brings his eulogy to a close in a spectacularly stunning crescendo of beauty (198b). It is clearly the kind of rhetorical display where one simply throws in any and every beautiful thing one can get hold of, and which consequently is much more rhyme than reason. He does this because he wants the admiration of the audience; he wants to be loved. As I have argued above, he especially wants to be loved by Socrates. It must come as a great disappointment to him, then, that though all those present applaud him vigorously, Socrates does not seem to be impressed with his wisdom.

---------- * ---------- * ----------

---

[246] Cf. Strauss *Natural Right and History* 82.

Agathon argues the youth of Eros explicitly in contradistinction to Phaedrus: "Though I agree with Pheadrus in many other respects, I do not agree that Eros is more ancient that Kronos and Iapetos" (195b-c). This is notable because – setting aside Alcibiades' unexpected arrival and speech – Agathon is the second to last speaker, i.e., there are many other speeches (three recounted and an undetermined additional number, 180c) that he could have singled out for criticism, but of all these he chooses Phaedrus. This indicates that there was something about Phaedrus' speech in particular that piqued his interest, something about it that seemed especially relevant to him and his purposes in making his argument. Agathon perceives that Phaedrus' assertion of the great old age of Eros is contrary to the general thrust of his own argument

To see the significance of this, we need to reflect on the critical importance of the issue of the age of Eros in the argument of each. Eros is for Agathon happy in respect of his beauty and goodness (195a), and the first element of his happiness that Agathon mentions is his youth. Youth is a passive quality: the young as young have not *done* anything (other than to have lived for a short while). The other three elements of the beauty of Eros that Agathon mentions – tenderness, suppleness and blooming complexion (195c-b) – are also passive qualities, and are, as I have already observed, qualities that tend to inhere especially in the young. Agathon praises Eros for what he (passively) is rather than what he (actively) does, and there is no sense in his speech that it is what we do that makes us what we are. Eros is inseparable from beauty, and what is beautiful is youth (cf. *Republic* 474d-a). If we reconsider his discussion of the virtues of Eros with this in mind, we see that they all assume youth. In sum, his discussion of the happiness of Eros is, from beginning to end, really an elaboration of his youthfulness (196b-197b). What is praiseworthy about Eros is his youthful beauty.

By contrast, for Phaedrus, what is praiseworthy about Eros is his great old age: "And as he is the oldest, we have him as the cause of the greatest goods" (178c). Phaedrus prominently refers to Eros as the oldest a total of four times in his short speech (the shortest of all seven speeches, 178b, twice at 178c, and 180b), thus indicating the critical importance of his age for his argument. One can discern two related senses of 'old': that which came into being long ago, and that which is closer to the end of its life. Phaedrus appeals to both senses and conflates them (e.g., the idea that Eros is so old it has no parents, versus the idea that the older lover is more honourable than the younger beloved). The old that is closer to death is what people generally mean by 'old', since what never comes close to death is ageless, or 'forever young' (like the gods). The old that is closer to death tends to be, precisely because closer to death, ugly rather than beautiful. The praise of the old thus naturally tends to be praise of what the old has *done*. In praising Eros as the oldest, Phaedrus praises it for what it has done, and thus inspires to new or future praiseworthy deeds. He does not think of Eros as intrinsically beautiful and good, but rather as instrumental to some greater good. As he sees it, the benefit of Eros is that it intensifies the feeling of "shame in the face of shameful things and love of honour [*philotimian*] in the face of honourable things", and in this way brings about – for both cities and private individuals – the real or genuine good: the accomplishment of great and beautiful deeds (178d). These are the sort of heroic deeds about which the poets write their beautiful poems. Phaedrus is much more impressed with the beautiful deeds of men than with whatever beautiful attributes they might have. What these beautiful deeds have in common is that they are not simply self-regarding; and because they do not simply conduce to the good of the one who executes them, they all involve a measure of sacrifice. The sort of beautiful deeds with which Phaedrus is impressed tend towards the benefit of the city: oldest Eros is instrumental to the public good. The great old age of Eros is integral to his political understanding of it.

There is a connection between the erotic character of each man and his political significance. I have argued that Phaedrus represents a basic psychic orientation that supports politics, whereas Agathon's derogates from them. This difference follows directly from the different position enunciated by each man as regards the age of Eros. For Agathon, Eros is young and new. He is not, however, young and new in same sense as are the gods of the pantheon – as being always young and new – but rather in the sense of being young and new *now*, or today. The gods of the pantheon are gods of all Athenian citizens, whether young or old, whereas Agathon's god Eros is the god of the young only. Agathon forgets the problem of death, or rather flees from death, just as does his Eros (195b). There is no death for Agathon because there is no tomorrow for Agathon (or yesterday). His 'nowness' makes him amoral, for consequences unfold in time, and it is precisely the awareness of consequences that leads naturally to the development of morality. There are no consequences for Agathon, only present beauty. But a sense of consequences is essential to politics, for all political debate and action is essentially concerned with what conduces to the good of the city and what detracts from it. Phaedrus, in praising oldest Eros – in praising what he himself is not – shows an awareness of tomorrow and yesterday, and he is accordingly aware of, and concerned with, consequences. We see this in his very conception of eros, which has it as instrumental to the good rather than good in itself. It is because he is aware of consequences, or that present steps are instrumental towards the attainment of future good, that he is aware of his dependence on others for his own good, and is thus willing to praise them above himself, or to give them their due. 'To give people their due' is a moral precept. Phaedrus, like Agathon, is selfish, but unlike Agathon, his selfishness does not issue in amorality. 'Giving people their due' reflects both a sense of proportionality and a willingness to act on it. Proportionality is intrinsic to any viable conception of justice, and the healthy city exists by virtue of the viability of its conception of justice. As we have seen, Agathon's conception of justice is not viable.

This is largely because Agathon lives in a dream world created out of his own imagination. It could be said that Phaedrus also lives in a dream world, for he too is informed by poetic imagination. The virtue that he so admires is personified by the beautiful characters – like Hector and Achilles – created by Homer and the other great traditional poets. These poets create images or likenesses of what is popularly regarded as virtue, and Phaedrus believes the likenesses to be true virtue (179a-b; cf. *Republic* 476c). But these poets are much better than Agathon. The illusion of reality in which Phaedrus believes creates the basis for viable politics, whereas the illusion that Agathon creates does not. Phaedrus' account of eros is directed towards poetic depictions of demotic virtue, especially martial virtue or courage. Martial virtue may not be true or complete virtue, but it is indeed integral to politics. And Phaedrus has a politically viable sense of both justice and courage. By contrast, Agathon's sense of the virtues is silly and whimsical (196b-197b), and hence not politically viable. Agathon's poetic illusion is essentially apolitical. Because Eros is for Agathon new and young, the city that corresponds to it would become new and young over and over again. In such a city, there could be no memory of past greatness and no recognizable context within which future greatness could occur. The city in which the dominant ethos was 'live for today' is not viable. Agathon's poetry is contrary to politics because it destroys the illusion of permanence that is essential to the continued existence of the city.

For all the differences between the two beloveds, there is this important similarity: they both lack an 'internal' sense of shame, or one that operates independently of being observed externally. As we have seen, the implication of the question and answer exchange between Socrates and Agaton would seem to be that Agathon feels no shame before people for whom he has no respect.[247] And since Agathon earns his living before the many, and is – as poet – essentially connected to them, it would follow that he could hardly ever feel shame regardless of how he acts, i.e., he is generally shameless. Socrates' questioning must cause Agathon an increasing amount of discomfort as it progresses, for it comes to the very point of making clear the implications of how he stands towards the many. Agathon is saved from this exposure by the intervention of Phaedrus, who insists that the eulogies to Eros not be set aside in favour of Socratic dialogue. It is Phaedrus who insists that the essential law of the dialogue be followed, not Eryximachus, who – as the lawgiver of the dialogue – we would have expected to intervene. This is because Socrates' line of questioning would have caused Phaedrus as well as Agathon some discomfort. For Phaedrus, recall, gave an account of the psychology of honour and shame that was critically dependent upon the effect of being observed by others.[248] This political account of honour and shame would be called into question by the line of inquiry Socrates pursues with Agathon.

For both men, the opinion of 'others', or *common* opinion, is authoritative. This is true for Phaedrus for the reason just indicated, and it was signalled early in his speech by the rhetorical appeal that he makes to common opinion in an effort to bolster his argument: he refers to three 'others' in particular – a poet (Hesiod), a philosopher (Parmenides), and a genealogical expert (Akousilaus) – to show that "there is widespread agreement in many sources that Eros is among the oldest" (178b-c). And Agathon's acceptance of the authority of common opinion – notwithstanding the fact that he despises it – is evident from the fact that he depends on the endorsement of common opinion for his success as a poet, and from his consensual conception of justice (196b-c). The reader is meant to reflect upon the political implications of the authority of common opinion, especially as regards the political problem of honour and shame. It was the speech of Phaedrus that first alerted us to the great importance of a sense of honour and shame for politics. Before a man can be politically honoured for something, people must generally *agree* on what this thing is. But this is not sufficient: in order for this agreement to have any *practical* effect, there must also be substantial agreement on *how* the thing to be honoured is to be recognized. People might (and generally do) agree that wisdom is admirable, and worthy of honour, but in order for this agreement actually to translate into politically effective honour, they must also generally agree on how this quality can be recognized in a man. They must have some means of distinguishing the wise from the unwise. In the little question and answer exchange that precedes Agathon's speech, Socrates doubts that Agathon can do this. The wise are mingled in the theatre with the unwise (194c), and look much the same as the unwise. How are we to tell them apart? It takes wisdom to recognize wisdom, and hence the many unwise will never be able effectively to honour it.[249] Effective political honour for the man of wisdom as wise is not possible. This is but one of the reasons why the idea of the rule of wisdom is so very problematic. The practical requirement that there be substantial agreement on *how* the thing to be politically honoured is to be recognized, requires, in effect, that the thing to be honoured must be *easily* recognizable. Phaedrus honours the old (and the brave); Agathon honours the young (and the beautiful). Different as they are, these things have in common that they are easily recognizable: it is within the capacity of virtually anybody to look into the theatre and distinguish the young from the old. But obviously neither the state of being young, nor of being old, is – in and of itself – relevant to the good of the city or political rule, and hence worthy of political honour. Perhaps what we are meant to see here is that *everything* that can be effectively politically honoured is likely to be inadequate, because unreliable as an indication of political good. If so, that fact would reveal an inherent limitation of politics, for it would mean that the city could not adequately assess, let alone pursue, its own good (or, at any rate, what is *best* for it).

---

[247] See pp. 200-202 above.

[248] See pp. 46-50 above.

---

[249] They generally regard as 'wise' whoever most cogently and beautifully articulates what they already believe: thus, the sages, the poets, and the sophists.

The practical requirement that the thing to be politically honoured be easily recognizable means that the city will honour lesser goods above greater goods, for whereas political honour requires a common assessment of the greatest goods, an accurate assessment of the greatest goods (such as wisdom) must be uncommon. This endows political honour with a kind of chimerical and insubstantial quality. It does not, however, seem to lessen the importance most people attach to it, as is evident from the trouble people take to get it. Honour is one of the main goods that political man *competes* for. Competition is usually necessary for whoever wants to get it, because, generally speaking, more honour for one means less honour for others. In this respect, honour is very much like the other major good the city distributes: money. Both honour and wealth are necessarily in short supply because, whereas man's demand for each is limited only by his imagination, and hence practically unlimited, the supply of each is finite because simply distributing more of each devalues it.[250] Consequently, whoever wants more honour will generally have to fight for it. Even though only a relatively few love honour so much, such fighting can become politically dysfunctional. If this dysfunction is to be avoided, most people must acquiesce with less honour, if necessary through some sort of compulsion, though most are psychologically disposed to accept less. We see in the character of Phaedrus the psyche of one so disposed. As I have observed, Phaedrus, unlike Agathon, does not create an argument that would establish himself as worthy of honour. Like Agathon, he probably sees his own beauty as honorific, and he probably likewise understands the fact of being loved as honorific, but he never actually produces any arguments to that effect. He is passive in respect of honour – he does not himself *compete* for it. Rather, he praises or honours what he himself is most emphatically not: Phaedrus has no capacity for the beautiful deeds of courage he seems to eulogize no less than Eros. In actively honouring others while at the same time making no active demand for his own honour, he in effect mitigates the politically destabilizing effects of competition for it.

---

[250] In the case of money, this is the principle of 'Gresham's Law', named after the economist who first explained it fully: bad money drives out good. This is of course the problem that we now recognize as monetary inflation: the more money that comes into circulation, the less valuable it becomes. Honour works according to the exact same principle.

---------- * ---------- * ----------

If we could speak of the tragic in Agathon's speech, it would be that, whereas Eros provides us with happiness, he is the god of the young only, a god that we all lose as we grow old. This is weak: the fact that we lose the eros that Agathon describes as we grow old may be a sad thought, but it hardly seems tragic. Agathon's speech is not very tragic. This is a curious fact in view of the way that the dialogue ends, with Socrates compelling Agathon and Aristophanes to agree that the same man should be able to make comedy and tragedy (223d). Whereas the dialogue does seem to provide an exemplar of comedy, it does not seem to provide an exemplar of tragedy.

But Aristophanes is the instantiation of the dialogue's teaching on the relationship between tragedy and comedy. As I have argued, his apparent comedy is actually a tragedy on a deeper level, which shows that the same man can indeed make comedy and tragedy.[251] Socrates also compels the two poets to agree on a second closely related point: he who is "*by art* a tragic poet is also a comic poet" (and not obversely, my italics, 223d). The second point is actually more insightful as to the relationship between tragedy and comedy. The gods are the product of tragic poetry, and he who can create the gods by art (i.e., as opposed to by inspiration, cf. *Phaedrus* 245a) are for that very reason uninspired and unenchanted by them. Being unenchanted by the gods gives one a certain freedom from them. This of course includes the freedom to see the ridiculous in them, and hence to present it, i.e., to make them a theme of comedy. This is why the possession of the tragic art means that one must possess the comic art as well.[252]

The gods constitute the core of the problem as presented in the political story of *Symposium*. The gods underwrite the laws of the city, and are integral to its common way of life. But they are vulnerable to the threats personified by Pausanius and Eryximachus: an awareness of their parochial character and an awareness of the reality of science, both of which seem to argue against the reality of the gods, and hence to undercut belief in them. Arsistophanes knows that the political sickness of Athens is tied to the sickness of her gods, but does not use his art to create novel gods. Rather, his speech is, as I have observed, a plea for traditional piety; he uses his art in an attempted rehabilitation of the gods. Given that this rehabilitation fails – and, it would seem, must fail – one wonders why he did not attempt the poetic creation of novel gods instead. We get an indication of the answer to this question with Agathon's speech. He creates the novel god Eros, which is, as I have argued, nothing more than an idealized version of himself: Agathon would be god. The problem is that there is nothing very compelling about Agathon: he is not a god-like man. Alternatively, he could use his art to serve the interests of others, or to make others gods, which would make him a lickspittle (cf. *Republic* 568b). In sum: the creation of novel gods by art is likely to be a vain exercise by little men, and it is hard to see how one could expect anything politically salutary to come of that.[253] But Aristophanes is preoccupied with the politically salutary.

---

[251] See pp. 193-195 above.

[252] Cf. Strauss *On Plato's Symposium* pp. 169-170 with 285-286.

We have seen that the poetic rehabilitation of the gods does not succeed, and that neither does the poetic creation of novel ones; the dialogue seems to teach that the solution to the political problem is not to be found in poetry that recognizes no higher authority above itself. Perhaps, however, a *natural* basis for belief in the gods can be found; perhaps the solution to the political problem is to be found in philosophy. This is the possibility explored in Socrates' eulogy to eros.

---

[253] As Rousseau so presciently observed in his Social Contract, to expect anything more would be to expect something of a miracle, and we can only hope for such miracles from men who are truly great:

> This sublime reason, far above the range of the common herd, is that whose decisions the legislator puts into the mouth of the immortals, in order to constrain by divine authority those whom human prudence could not move. But it is not anybody who can make the gods speak, or get himself believed when he proclaims himself their interpreter. The great soul of the legislator is the only miracle that can prove his mission. Any man may grave tablets of stone, or buy an oracle, or feign secret intercourse with some divinity, or train a bird to whisper in his ear, or find other vulgar ways of imposing on the people. He whose knowledge goes no further may perhaps gather around him a band of fools; but he will never found an empire, and his extravagances will quickly perish with him. Idle tricks form a passing tie; only wisdom can make it lasting. (Book II, ch 7, 2nd last para)

Agathon has an 'art' of poetry, which – together with his rhetorical flourishes – constitute his bag of idle tricks; he does not have the great soul that would prove his mission.

9 Socrates

> *I have given to understand how it was that Socrates could repel: it is therefore all the more necessary to explain his fascination. That he discovered a new kind of agon, that he became its first fencing master for the noble circles of Athens, is one point. He fascinated by appealing to the agonistic impulse of the Greeks – he introduced a variation into the wrestling match between young men and youths. Socrates was also a great erotic.*
>
> *(Neitzsche "The Problem of Socrates" aph 8 in* Twilight of The Idols*)*

Agathon's eulogy to eros has succeeded as he wished: it is greeted by all with enthusiastic applause (198a). He has effectively turned this select little assembly of encomiasts into a mini-version of the theatre (*théatron*) where he won the tragedy contest the day before. The theatre is a place where the regnant ideas and opinions of the city are acted out on a stage before a wide array of citizens. It is thus a natural metaphor for the city, and Plato often uses it as such. We can, accordingly, see in Socrates' response to the situation created by Agathon a teaching on the nature of the philosopher's political activity.

His immediate response is to profess himself unequal to the task of eulogizing eros, and to suggest for that reason that he must withdraw his offer to speak. He claims that he is "at a loss" (*aporësoimi*), especially upon having heard such a marvellous eulogy as Agathon's, for "who would not be thunderstruck on hearing the beauty of its words and phrases?" He says he now realizes that he is to be "laughed at for having agreed to eulogize Eros" in turn with the other men, for he cannot compete with any of them, since it seems he knows "nothing of the matter" of how to eulogize. In his stupidity, he believed "the truth had to be told about anything that was given a eulogy". But this apparently is not at all what *they* thought; they thought that the idea was "the attribution to the matter at hand of the greatest and the fairest things possible [*allà tò hös mégista anatithénai tô prágmati kaì hös kállista*]", and "if the praise were false, it was of no importance anyway". Socrates protests that he cannot make beautiful speeches irrespective of their truth – he simply "does not have the power for it [*ou gàr àn dunaímën*]". The most he can manage is to eulogize by telling the truth on his own simple terms, with the phrasing and arrangement of his sentences "as they chance to come" (198b-199b). As Bloom has observed, the irony here seems so heavy handed and clumsy as to be utterly transparent, and really more akin to sarcasm.[254] His ostensible point, which none of his listeners could take seriously, is that he is not sufficiently skilled in this manner of speaking to offer a eulogy of that kind. The point that they could not help but hear is that it is *they* who are to be 'laughed at' for going so far overboard. In their effort to present Eros in the best and most beautiful light possible, they forgot all about the truth. In short, he mocks them for being so very silly about the whole thing.

Rhetorically, Socrates' mockery of the men is intended to get their attention, and then to gain control over them. Evidently, it works: Socrates *does* in this manner gain control of what had become Agathon's city, and does so on his own terms (199b). But if we attend to what Socrates actually says, we see that his mocking response serves a number of different purposes simultaneously. With it, he reminds everyone of the founding purpose of the city, which was to praise eros (177a-d).[255] This founding purpose seems to be straightforward and unproblematic, but apparently it is not, for the citizens have not been true to it. If we further attend to what Socrates says, we see that he shifts the issue from the praise of eros to the truth about praise. The shift is justified by the fact that knowledge of the truth about praise is required in order to be true to the founding purpose of the city: anyone who did not know the truth about praise could hardly be expected to give an adequate praise of eros (or anything else, for that matter). Evidently, most people do not distinguish between praise and flattery. Socrates claims to know the truth about praise, and he will soon demonstrate his knowledge. We see then that the knowledge of the philosopher is required in order to fulfil the founding purpose of the city. In shifting the issue from the praise of eros to the truth about praise, Socrates makes the truth and the need to know it an issue. This is educational. Immediately upon speaking, Socrates begins to educate. Socrates evidently exercises control over the city for the purpose of education; the public face of philosophy is education.

The issue of praise is an *especially* important one for the public to be educated about. For what the citizens deem to be worthy of praise – or, obversely, blame –

---

[254] Bloom *Love and Friendship* 496.

[255] For *Symposium* as city, and Eryximachus as law giver, see p. 11 and 36-37 above.

determines to a very large extent the character of the whole city, as we saw in Pausanius' eulogy. Perhaps most importantly, it determines the extent of the city's openness to philosophy (cf. *Republic* 487a-494a, esp. 487a-489c and 492b-494a). For if the city blames true philosophers, being unable to distinguish them from crank philosophers, or if it praises to the greatest extent those who are not in fact worthy of the greatest praise, then the political possibilities of philosophy are limited as a result. While Socrates' political education cannot be expected simply to resolve such problems, it can nevertheless be expected to convey a sense of the importance of the truth, and this is – in and of itself – a politically salutary teaching.

There is, however, much more than a politically salutary teaching here. That the issue of the truth about praise is of great *philosophical* importance is indicated by the following considerations. *Symposium* is mainly constituted by a series of speeches given for the express purpose of *praising* Eros; the form of the dialogue is governed by an injunction to praise. As we do not understand a Platonic dialogue unless we understand its form, in the case of *Symposium* this means that we must understand praise. The issue of the truth about praise arises at what could be said to be the heart of the dialogue, i.e., the above quote occurs at what is the exact arithmetical centre of the dialogue. Moreover, the importance of the issue is signalled by the fact that Socrates claims unequivocally to *know* "the truth about praising anything" (198d). As I have noted above, positive claims by Socrates actually to know anything are exceedingly rare in the Platonic dialogues, which fact heightens their pedagogic value when they do occur. There is in this very dialogue another such claim. When the plan for the evening is first being proposed by Eryximachus, it receives the decisive support of Socrates, who endorses it saying:

> No one will cast a vote against you, Eryximachus. For I would surely not beg off, as *I claim to have expert knowledge of nothing but erotic things*. (My italics, 177d)

Socrates' two claims to know in this dialogue appear at first to be difficult to reconcile: how can he know the truth about praise if he knows *nothing but erotic things*? This is possible only if the truth about praise is integral to the truth about erotic things. In sum, the issue of the truth about praise warrants careful and extended consideration.

Socrates actually provides a remarkably precise statement of the truth that he knows about praise:

> For in my stupidity, I believed the truth had to be told about anything that was given a eulogy, and that this was the underpinning, and that by selecting the most beautiful parts of the truth one was to arrange them in the seemliest manner. (198d)

We can discern here three general principles of praise: a) tell only the truth about anything being eulogized, for the truth is the underpinning of the praise; b) select the most beautiful parts of this truth; and c) arrange them in the seemliest manner. His principles of praise clearly emphasize the truth. It is vitally important to see, however, that they do not thereby preclude one from creating a false impression. We can find *something* to praise in virtually anything (cf. 177b), including, for example, horrible people. Joseph Stalin and Adolph Hitler were no doubt monsters, but they must have had some praiseworthy qualities – at the very least, they must have had some political skill. They could, accordingly, be eulogized for that, and for all that goes with it: they must have had some tenacity, some intelligence, some leadership ability, and so on. Using these and other similar parts of the truth about them, a compelling eulogy *could* be constructed for them. But if it were, it would be utterly misleading. If all that one knew of these men was what was heard of them in such a eulogy, one would receive a false impression of them, *even if* everything said about them was true.

The fact that one can effectively eulogize bad men even while adhering to Socrates' three principles of praise shows that those principles cannot be complete in and of themselves. At least a fourth principle is needed in order to ensure the proper *use* of praise. One can uncover the required principle by considering the reflexive application of Socrates' stated 'truth about praise' – for example, in applying Socrates' stated 'truth about praise' to the praise of the praise of men. Following his principles of praise, the praise of men must be praised by telling only the truth about it, and selecting the most beautiful parts of this truth, and arranging them in the seemliest possible manner. To simplify matters for the sake of exposition, the truth about the praise of the praise of men is that, as we have seen, both bad men and good men can be effectively praised. The most beautiful part of this truth is clearly that praise can be given for good men, for the praise of good men is an inspiration to goodness, whereas the praise of bad men encourages badness, which is ugly. The praise of the praise of men then could only be the praise of the praise of good men. The goodness of the men praised justifies praising them. The principle that resolves the problem at hand is: praise only those things that are 'on balance' praiseworthy. This is a principle of proportionality, or justice, rather than a principle of praise per se, which might explain why Socrates does not include it among his principles of praise.[256]

Socrates' truth about praise is that one selects the most beautiful parts of the truth and arranges them in the seemliest manner. Moreover, such praise is beautifying, since it omits the less attractive parts. And his eulogy ends with an appealing account of what seems to be an erotic consummation in true beauty, or – to borrow language from the ontology of Plato's *Republic* – the form of the beautiful (210a-212a); his truth about eros in the end seems to be that it is love of the beautiful. Both praise and eros are then directed to the beautiful, which commonality suggests why the truth about praise is integral to the truth about erotic things. One who has overpowering eros for the beautiful is never satisfied with mere counterfeits of the beautiful, but is driven to the beautiful itself, driven to know *true* beauty. If the truth about praise is that one selects the most beautiful *parts* of the truth about the thing praised and arranges them in the seemliest manner, then one must know the *whole* truth about a thing in order adequately to praise it, for one can only recognize the parts as parts of some given whole in light of knowledge of that whole,[257] and then *select* the *best* parts out of *all* parts. The fully erotic lover – i.e., the one who has overpowering eros for the beautiful, and is never satisfied with mere counterfeits of it, but who is driven to the beautiful itself, and who is thus driven to know *true* beauty – necessarily has skill with praise. For the ability to recognize the beautiful in any given thing that one might praise requires the ability to recognize beauty as beauty, i.e., it requires that one know true beauty, which is what the fully erotic lover is driven to know; he is driven to know the standard against which true praise must be evaluated. This is key to his seductive charm.

---

[256] The issue is complicated when the thing praised involves what is in some sense one's own. For example, a man may become estranged from parents or fatherland. When this happens to wretched (*ponërious*) men, they blame and reproach them, so as not to garner criticism for neglecting them. By contrast, when this happens to 'noble and good men' (or, 'gentlemen'; *andra kalon k'agathon*), they

> compel themselves to conceal and praise; and should they become angry at some injustice inflicted by their parents or fatherland, they appease and conciliate themselves, compelling themselves to love and praise their own. (*Protagoras*, 346b)

The demands of justice are stronger, or in any event more complicated, in view of the claims of what is one's own, and hence the issue of the just use of praise becomes more complicated.

[257] The truth about praise could thus be said to be a rational dimension of eros.

Directedness to beauty and goodness is the *sine qua non* of eros. The many erotic people are directed to the many beautiful things. But none of these things are wholly or simply beautiful, for surely not every part of the whole of a thing is beautiful (cf. 211a-b). To embrace a beautiful thing is to embrace a thing that is in some sense not beautiful. The more one lusts after beautiful things, then, the more open one must be towards what is not beautiful, indeed even to what seems ugly. For only the beautiful itself is wholly and simply beautiful (210e-b), and, as Diotima makes clear, access to the beautiful itself is only to be gained through the many beautiful things (210a-e). The fully erotic lover must be open to both beauty and ugliness. This dual openness inevitably affects the quality of praise given by him. Whereas lesser lovers will be content to give praise that amounts merely to flattery, he will not. In saying 'merely', I do not mean to suggest that this sort of praise is necessarily ineffective. Quite to the contrary, most of us are not above being charmed by a little flattery, even though we may indeed suspect it to be flattery.[258] But the praise given by the fully erotic man is necessarily something more than flattery, for it reflects both the beautiful and the ugly that he knows.

The praise given by the fully erotic man will thus in a sense also be blame. We see this demonstrated in the character of Socrates, whose praise typically exhibits this multi-vocal quality. Speech that simultaneously praises and blames is perforce ironic. Socrates is of course widely understood as 'the ironic man'. But Plato also intends him to be understood as 'the erotic man'. The praise Socrates gives to 'beauties' or 'beloveds' is an expression of his erotic nature. It is also a species of Socratic irony. Socrates' irony is inseparable from his eros. This is an important point, for the relationship between the two elucidates the nature of each.

---

[258] Although, there are clearly limits to this sort of thing. There *must* be some sort of a connection to the truth (even if only a plausible one), or else it fails as praise. If one praises manifestly ugly people for their great beauty, one only draws attention to their ugliness, and so ridicules and insults them. Or, to take an overtly 'political' example, the eulogies given for the Eastern Bloc states of the Cold War, wherein they were praised by their leaders for their great justice and the surpassingly productive strength of their sparklingly efficient economies, had no connection to the truth, and so ended up as satires or parodies.

In order to understand it, a fairly lengthy consideration of Socratic irony is required. Judging from the way Socrates himself applies the term to others, he means by 'irony' speech which is multi-vocal, and which can hence be used to serve a plurality of purposes at the same time (*Gorgias* 489e). Because irony is multi-vocal, Socrates recognizes that it can be duplicitous, and can hence be used to hide what one really thinks, one's true meaning (*Lovers* 133d). His own ironic hiding is not a treacherous kind of hiding, however, but rather something more akin to playfulness – that is, when not simply dictated by politeness. This playfulness can have the effect of making him attractive to certain kinds of people. Alcibiades was clearly one of these, as is evidenced by his eulogy to Socrates. An examination of the context of the two times he mentions Socratic irony shows that it was indeed key to the attraction (216e, 218d, the only two uses of the term in *Symposium*). The first of these is especially instructive, and worth quoting at length:

> You see that Socrates is erotically inclined to the beauties, and is always around them, and that he is thunderstruck; and again that he is ignorant of everything and knows nothing. Now isn't this guise of his silenic? It certainly is… But he believes that all these possessions [i.e., beauty and riches and honour] are worth nothing and that we are nothing, I tell you, and all his life he keeps on being ironical and playful to human beings. And when he is in earnest and opened up, I do not know if anyone has seen the images within; but I once saw them, and it was my opinion that they were so divine, golden, altogether beautiful, and amazing that one had to do just about whatever Socrates commanded. Believing him to be in earnest about my youthful beauty, I believed I had had a lucky find and an amazing piece of good luck: I had the chance – if I gratified Socrates – to hear everything that he knew; for I used to take an amazing amount of pride in my youthful beauty. (216d-a)

The true beauty of Socrates, as Alcibiades sees it, lies in what is hidden within him: beautiful speeches. These are what Alcibiades longs for, and what (he claims) he would give anything to hear. But Socrates' speeches at first appear "laughable", for he talks of "pack-asses, blacksmiths, shoe-makers, and tanners". Alcibiades likens Socrates to the silenuses that sit in the shops of herm sculptors – ugly on the outside but beautiful on the inside – but it is more precisely the speeches of Socrates which are silenic. The essence of Socrates lies in his speeches. They are at once beautiful and ugly – ugly to those who are inexperienced at them, but beautiful "if one sees them opened up and gets oneself inside them" (215b, 221d-a). Speeches that are at once beautiful and ugly are perforce ironic. Socrates' silenic aspect inheres in his irony; the silenic guise that Alcibiades speaks of in the beginning of the above quote is simply Socratic irony. Socrates interacts with all kinds of people, but especially with those he is attracted to, and wishes to attract to himself, through ironic speech. Socrates' irony is inseparable from his eros. With his irony he hides the beauty of his speeches while at the same time giving an intimation of what is hidden. This sort of hiding is alluring because teasing, and it heightens the pleasure of his beauty whenever it is finally experienced and enjoyed.

Notice, however, that Alcibiades divides the silenic guise of Socrates, or rather the Socratic irony that he speaks of at the beginning of the above quote, into two parts. The second of these is immediately recognizable as the paramount exemplification of Socratic irony – indeed, has come to be commonly understood as virtually synonymous with it: that he is ignorant of everything and knows nothing. The first of Socrates' (alleged) silenic ironies is less commonly known, however: that he is erotically inclined to the beauties, and is always around them, and that he is thunderstruck. Both facets of Socrates' silenic irony are pertinent to what is at issue in the centre of *Symposium*: praise. Socrates provides outward shows of his erotic inclination to "beauties" in his praise, as we see him do with Agathon in this dialogue (e.g. 222e-a). But as I discussed above, Socratic praise, while all true, is nevertheless only *partial* truth, hence potentially misleading, hence well suited to hiding his true meaning, and hence always a possible means of irony. Socrates appears to heap lavish praise on Agathon: his speech was "so beautiful and varied" (*kàlon oútö kaì pantodapòn*), and he spoke so "marvellously" (or, 'wondrously'; *thaumastös*[259]) as to leave Socrates "at a loss" (*aporësoimi*), and so on. How wonderful that must sound to Agathon! The beauty of Agathon's speech is apparently manifest to all, and Socrates really does praise it *for that reason*. But the praise is equivocal. Socrates says that he almost ran off in shame, upon reflecting that he would not be able to say anything as beautiful (198b-c). It is, however, not clear whether it is awe at the beauty of what Agathon has said that makes him want to run off in shame, or if he simply means to imply that Agathon has just done something shameful in his eulogy. And he actually subtly suggests that the beauty of Agathon's speech is in a way ugly:

---

[259] This is the word Aristotle uses when he says that philosophy originates in a sense of wonder.

> For the speech reminded me of Gorgias; so I was simply affected as in the saying of Homer's.[260] I was afraid that Agathon in his speech would at last send the head of the dread speaker Gorgias against my speeches and turn me to very stone in speechlessness. (198c)

He puns here on Gorgias and Gorgon, and the pun implies that the 'Gorgiash' speeches of Agathon are like the 'gorgonish' heads of monsters from hell. Socrates' praise of Agathon is ironic. He continues on:

> And then I realized that I am to be laughed at for having agreed to eulogize Eros in turn with you, and for claiming that I was skilled in erotics, for as it has turned out I know nothing of the matter… (198c-d)

"I know nothing" – here is the irony for which he is famous – Socratic ignorance. In a moment, Socrates will make Agathon and everyone else aware that Agathon knows nothing of which he speaks. Socratic praise and Socratic ignorance are two complementary dimensions of Socratic irony. His praise is positive and active; with it he reaches out directly to specific individuals. His ignorance is negative and passive; with it he professes *not* to know, to be at a loss, and invites others to recognize that they are likewise. His praise draws people in, for most of us are gratified by praise. But in noting explicitly what is praiseworthy, his omissions implicitly suggest what may be blameworthy, what may be ugly or deficient. His praise has the effect of making the 'praisee' not quite sure of his meaning, but perhaps prepared to listen further. His ignorance then hooks people in the only way he is interested in hooking them: by making them aware that they do not in fact know sufficiently about any of the things they think are most important, and that consequently they must strive to know if they are to live well. The genuine experience of Socratic ignorance leaves people capable of experiencing it strangely attracted to Socrates, for as he articulates the perplexing questions which make us aware of our lack or neediness, we naturally look to him for solutions to them.[261]

---

[260] *Odyssey*, 11.633-635. Odysseus is recounting conversations with the shades of dead heroes, which he says he stopped out of fear that Persephone might send against him "some gorgonish head of a terrible monster up out of Hades".

[261] The Socratic seduction of Alcibiades, depicted in *Alcibiades I*, proceeds in this way. First Socrates praises Alcibiades in his equivocal fashion (103a-106a), then he makes

As we read Socrates' eulogy to eros, we must keep in mind the ironic character of his praise, and its implications. Because Socratic praise works by selecting the most beautiful *parts* of the truth to praise, it is *always* praise based on partial truths. The connection between praise and truth that his principles of praise enunciate is more precisely a connection between praise and partial truths. But, as noted before, partial truths *can* be utterly misleading,[262] and utterly misleading statements are generally regarded as practically equivalent to lies. It is the lies that most fully partake of the truth that are the most believable. Praise is thus a natural means of deception. Hence, while we can be confident that Socrates will tell the truth in his own eulogy to eros, we must be aware that the general impression that it creates may nevertheless be false.

---------- * ---------- * ----------

If Socrates' primary purpose in chastising the other symposiasts for their foolish praise of eros is to secure their attention and prepare the way for his own eulogy, he furthers this purpose by subjecting Agathon's central claims to dialectical examination. Agathon might be thought of as their proxy, since just moments earlier they offered him their exuberant applause (the praise of the many for the one), to this extent attesting that what he said pleased them (198a). In a sense then, they associate themselves with his argument. He is 'their man'. Given the circumstances, Socrates cannot engage all of the men individually in rational dialogue (which is of course the manner of speaking in which *he* excels, as we see evidence of throughout the Platonic dialogues), but this is the next best thing, for each man can see in Socrates' questioning of Agathon a questioning of himself (especially given the connection between Agathon and himself that each man has just moments earlier expressed with his applause). Socrates' questioning of Agathon is especially important, for at least two reasons, and hence warrants careful attention. First, this is the only place in *Symposium* where we witness Socrates proceeding

---

him aware of his own deficiencies (106b-116d), then of his complete ignorance concerning the things he thinks are most important (116e-119a), which leaves Alcibiades looking to Socrates for help, ready and eager to receive his education (119b-135e).

[262] This is why witnesses at trials are sworn to tell, "the truth, *the whole truth*, and nothing but the truth".

unimpeded in his characteristic fashion; and second, he himself indicates that what follows in his own eulogy will be somehow predicated on it.[263]

Socrates begins with what would seem to be a simple and straightforward point: that eros is an inherently relational thing. But the examples that he uses to illustrate his point are curious, and, the more one thinks about them, troubling:

> [I]s Eros the sort that is love of something or of nothing? I am not asking whether he is of a mother or of a father (for the question whether Eros is love of mother or father would be laughable), but just as if I asked about this very word, *father* – is father father of someone or not? (199d)

Of course Eros is love of something. But what, in particular, is ridiculous about the question of whether it is love of a mother or a father? This question acquires greater gravity given the peculiar meaning that Socrates attaches to the term 'ridiculous': what is worthy of laughter because foolish and bad (cf. *Republic* 452d-e).[264] The way that Socrates states the ridiculous question, it is not clear whether what is at issue is the love that a mother or father attracts *from* others, or their love *for* others, but in either case, there would seem to be nothing *inherently* foolish and bad about the love of a mother or father. But there *could be*, and the way that he clarifies his point suggests why: the father is indeed the father of someone, the father of a son or daughter. The eros[265] of a father, either for or from a son or daughter, is foolish and bad. Socrates continues to clarify his point, which ostensibly is simply that eros is a relational thing, with further examples drawn from familial relationships: the mother is a mother of a son or daughter, and the brother is the brother of a brother or sister. He uses or implies every familial relationship as an example except for the one that would have been appropriate to illustrate his point: the relationship between husband and wife. The relationship between husband and wife is the one familial relationship where eros is not foolish and bad. Socrates is obliquely alluding here, at the start of his conversation with Agathon, and prior to the beginning-proper of his own eulogy to eros, to the whole problem of incest.

---

[263] Socrates speaks of Agathon's agreement as the basis for his own speech (199b, 201d).
[264] Cf. pp. 151-153 above.
[265] It is useful to recall here that the Greeks had four words for love to our one. Fathers of course should love their sons, but not as lovers do. The two Greek words suitable for the love between parents and children are *agapë* and *storgë*, whereas the word in the 'ridiculous' question is the word for the erotic love of lovers, *érös*: *geloîon gàr àn eíë tò erötëma ei Erōs estìn érös mëtròs ë patrós*

Incest is a 'prior' sort of problem. Thinking about it tells us much about our erotic and political character. The reason why erotic relations between every member of the family except husband and wife are foolish and bad is because such relations would render the family impossible: it is inconceivable that families could exist where sons mated mothers, or brothers mated sisters. The incest taboo is thus absolutely essential to establishing families as the atoms out of which polities can be compounded. The family is unique to the human animal. In the case of all the other higher primates (dogs, chickens, and so forth) sons do indeed mate mothers, and brothers do indeed mate sisters. The other animals do this because they have no sense of 'son', 'mother', 'brother', 'sister' and so on; the other animals lack a sense of 'family'. They are instinctively driven to procreate, as indeed is the human animal, but instinct does not cause them to distinguish among potential mates on the basis of consanguinity. There is no *simply* natural basis for the family. How marriage and family could have ever arisen amongst human animals is perplexing, but it must be closely connected with our rational natures. Reason tells us that the polity cannot exist apart from families being bound together as a consequence of the incest taboo, and so reason must be involved in its establishment. The family does not exist in isolation; in order to maintain the taboo, laws must be created which enforce it, and laws only have effect within the context of the city. Because the family cannot exist apart from the city, it implies our political character. But the incest taboo cannot be maintained simply because the law threatens sanction for breaking it, or because it is reasonable to do so. In order to be maintained, breaking it must be practically unthinkable. Yet as it is indeed practical, it can only be something which is 'beyond consideration', i.e., practically unthinkable, on the basis of morality. The gods of the city embody its morality, and it is the fear of their wrath which creates within the individual psyche an unwillingness to transgress their basic tenets, among the most basic of which is surely the incest taboo. These things thus all go together: family, laws, city, and gods. The erotic character of the human animal is unique in that these things uniquely constitute the context within which it procreates. It could thus be said that these things are essential to our 'humanity', or that they are an essential part of what sets us apart from the animals.

Aristophanes' attack on Socrates in his *Clouds* is at bottom motivated by his conviction that he did not really understand these things, and that therefore his practice of philosophy was 'impolitic', and undercut the basis of specifically *human* life.[266] The first thing that Socrates says in *Clouds* about the gods is that they are not believed in at his 'thinkery' (247-248). Instead of the gods of the city he has naturalistic 'clouds' as his gods (252-313). By the end of the play, the 'hero' of the play, Strepsiades, is being beaten by his son, who was educated at Socrates' 'thinkery'. Moreover, the son happily recites poetry to the father about brother-sister incest (1371-1372). Aristophanes implies that Socrates' philosophy issues in the destruction of family, and hence politics and recognizably *human* existence. But in obliquely – and thus *politely* – raising the whole problem of incest here at the outset of his eulogy to eros, Socrates demonstrates that he is indeed aware of the basis of the family, and of the unique character of specifically *human* eros.

The familial examples serve as the basis for the conclusion that Socrates wants to reach: that Eros is eros of something (199e). Having established the relational quality of eros, he pursues the implications of this. He asks Agathon: "That Eros that is the love of something, does he desire [*epithumeî*] this or not?" (200a). Agathon assents. Socrates continues to receive Agathon's nodding assent to an argument that can be easily summed up: if one can only desire what one lacks, and if Eros indeed desires the beautiful, then it follows that Eros cannot itself be beautiful (199e-201b). He thus dispatches Agathon's thesis with the most remarkable ease, and in the process shows that Agathon does not really know anything about eros.

But there is more to this apparently facile argument than initially appears. For one thing, Agathon does not notice, or at any rate does not comment on, Socrates' introduction of the word 'desire' into the argument. But the reader surely must, for it seems entirely unmotivated. The words 'desire' and 'eros' are of course closely related in everyday speech, which might justify the way that Socrates introduces 'desire' into the argument. Yet they are not so closely related that 'desire' permeates the whole of

---

[266] Cf. pp. 148-149 above.

Symposium. Only two other speakers use it: Eryximachus and Aristophanes. Eryximachus is of course a doctor, who explicitly claims to understand everything in terms of body. And Aristophanes is, as I have argued, a kind of soul doctor, who ridicules Eryximachus for his foolish preoccupation with body and consequent neglect of soul.[267] But he is still a doctor who insists upon the great importance of the body, and his argument for eros as the love of one's own is unintelligible apart from it. Moreover, it is, as I have observed, one of the great virtues of Aristophanes that he constantly reminds us of the fact that we are all *embodied* souls, and forces us to reflect upon the significance of this. Prior uses of the word 'desire' thus associate it with the needs of the soul that can be traced to the body.

It is precisely because Socrates appeals to this sense of the word 'desire' in his argument with Agathon that it seems so compelling. What Socrates is implicitly alluding to are the *bodily* desires, or appetites.[268] An example will clarify. Thirst is a desire for drink. We are thirsty because we are in *need* of drink, and once we *have* drink, we no longer need or desire it – we say our thirst has been 'quenched' by drink. Actually *having* the object of desire, and hence satisfying the desire, marks the end of the desire. All this is 'necessary' in the sense that it is simply the way that the bodily desires, or appetites, work (200a-b; cf. *Republic* 437d-e, 439a). When Socrates argues with Agathon that Eros desires the beautiful, and that hence it is in need of and does not have the beautiful, he implicitly likens the beautiful to drink. But whereas drink is a good thing for one who is thirsty, no one would ever say it was a beautiful thing. Once one sees the sort of phenomenon to which Socrates' argument actually implicitly appeals, it loses much of its rhetorical force and effect.

As to the effect of this realization upon the basic soundness of his argument, it would seem that one must consider the extent to which the desire for water is analogous to the desire for beauty. The two desires seem to be disanalogous in respect of possession: whereas actually having the water that one desires (thirsts for) satisfies and thus ends the desire (thirst) for water, it does not seem that having beauty oneself ends the desire for beauty. Common sense and experience tells us that beautiful people desire beautiful things, especially beautiful beloveds. One can thus simultaneously have and desire beauty. Socrates' argument seems to be pure sophistry.

---

[267] See pp. 152-153 above.

[268] I discussed these in some detail when I considered Eryximachus' medical understanding of eros in light of the psychology of *Republic*. See pp. 120-121 above.

But if we attend closely to what he actually says, we can see the serious in it. Socrates asks whether everyone

> who desires what is not at hand desires what is not present; and what he does not have [*échei*] and what he himself is [*estin*] not and what he is in need of – it is things like that of which desire and love are? (200e)

There are two ways in which one can have and desire beauty for oneself: a) to have and desire it as a personal attribute, i.e., to *be* oneself beautiful, and b) to have and desire beautiful things, i.e., to *possess* beauty. This fact causes us to reflect on the relationship between being and having. As Socrates develops his argument, he is really talking about *being*: "Would anyone want to be tall if he were tall, or strong if he were strong?... For he surely would not be in need of those things that he already is" (200b). He discusses five personal attributes of men: height, strength, swiftness, health, and wealth (200b-d). What these attributes have in common is that they are all components of the attractiveness or desirability of men. In this, they are akin to beauty.[269] Nobody, Socrates says, who is tall wants to be tall, and nobody who is strong wants to be strong. If a strong man says he desires to be strong, what he really means is that he desires to possess strength also in the future, "since at the present moment at least, whether he wants [it] or not", he has it (200d). If a beautiful man says he desires to *be* beautiful, he cannot mean that he desires to be beautiful now – what he must mean is that he desires to remain beautiful also in the future. The inference is that Eros cannot desire to be presently beautiful if it is presently beautiful. But, as noted, one can be attracted to beauty in something else, hence desire it, whether or not beautiful oneself

---

[269] Part of the pedagogy here is that we are meant to consider beauty in terms of these things. Is beauty like height: more or less fixed throughout our adult life, a 'given' by nature and not something that we control? Or would it be like strength and swiftness, something that is partially 'given', but which largely comes to us through our own effort and habit? Or like health, a comprehensive state of well being? Or again like wealth, something which is conventional and in principle limitless? If beauty is like these things, then we can begin to understand our desire for it in terms of the benefit we derive from them. For example, desiring to be beautiful could be like desiring to be strong and swift: a desire for a capacity to do certain things. Or it could be like desiring to be healthy: a desire to attain a certain state of being. Or like desiring to be wealthy: a desire to have a resource, one that can be used in the acquisition of whatever things might be desired – such as a beautiful beloved.

Socrates, however, has introduced the temporal into the discussion, and so the difference between being and becoming. The capstone of his speech is Diotima's description of the form of the beautiful (210a-212a), which is pure being (211a-b and 211e-a). But, as I will argue below, she indicates that eros is part of the realm of becoming. This is the real reason why it cannot be beautiful. Socrates is pointing to a basic problem with the nature of our existence. As erotic beings, we desire the beautiful and the good, but, because we exist as *embodied* souls, we are temporal beings; our mode of being is ultimately inconsistent with the mode of being of what we want. This insight is actually implicit in a consideration of the desires, even the most mundane of which points beyond itself, to something higher. The desire for something, once satisfied, is ended. Water satisfies thirst, and hence ends it. But as thinking beings, we realize that the water was good for us when we were thirsty in the past, and that it will be again in the future, and so we want to have it also in the future. The present desire for good things leads ineluctably to the desire for good things also in the future, for if they will be desirable in the future, then what reason is there to stop desiring them? One wants what is desirable not merely now, not for a brief time, but also in the future. This desire to have what is desirable in the future is actually a desire to have it forever, for in the future the same logic will again apply. What is forever is permanent; all our desires actually imply a desire for permanent being. But we cannot have anything forever because our lives are finite. Death is contrary to our desiring nature. To desire anything implies a desire for immortality (cf. 206a with 207a).

I have observed that Agathon does not comment on, or appear to notice, Socrates' introduction of 'desire' into the argument about eros. There are a number of things that he does not notice, but which he really should. An especially striking example of this is Socrates' misconstrual of his argument. Socrates asks Agathon: "think back to something you asserted Eros to be of in your speech". He then immediately "reminds" him:

> ... matters were arranged by the gods through love of beautiful things, for there would not be love of ugly things. Weren't you speaking somewhat along these lines? (201a)

Agathon agrees, but actually what he said was substantially different:

> … whereas since the birth of this god [Eros], all good things have resulted for gods as well as for human beings from loving the beautiful things. (197b)

Agathon's point was that the god Eros is responsible for the benefits that accrue to both gods and humans from loving beautiful things. The way that Socrates says it, 'the gods', i.e., all the gods, or the gods in general, arrange things through the love of beautiful things. This is as much as to say that there is nothing special about Eros as a god. This prepares the way for the assertion that he will make shortly, that eros is not a god at all (202c). But it also runs counter to what would seem to have been a crucial component of Agathon's argument – that Eros is king of the gods (195c), and the most happy, the most beautiful, and the best of the gods (195a). Yet Agathon simply agrees to this construal of his argument. What explains that? One who constructs an argument can generally remember it, if not word for word, then at least the main points, and would hence be alert to changes in it that have the effect of undercutting its general thrust. The reason Agathon cannot remember is simple: he was more concerned with making a beautiful speech than a rational argument. To rephrase, *what* he said does not matter nearly as much as *how* he said it, or the way it sounded. It is because the beauty of the speech is the main thing that interests him that it is easy to forget the content or substance of the speech. The meaning of the speech is ultimately not that important to him. His speech is a beautiful exterior that corresponds to no meaningful interior. And his ability to think and understand is evidently impeded by his preoccupation with the beautiful exterior.

This preoccupation is born of a neglect of goodness. The final question Socrates asks Agathon is: "Are the good things beautiful as well in your opinion" (201c)? This *is* a question, and if we think about it, we see that the relationship between the good and the beautiful must be quite complex. There are things that are beautiful but not good (such as an effective eulogy to a bad man), and things that are good but not beautiful (such as water when one is thirsty). Agathon, however, simply conflates beauty and goodness, and the manner in which he conflates them implies a neglect of goodness. To oversimplify for the sake of clarity, he is all beauty and no goodness, which of course makes his name (lit. 'good one') ironic. Nevertheless, his speech perhaps suggests something about the relationship between beauty and goodness. It is universally appealing (198a), and yet when one considers it enough actually to see its vacuity, one experiences a feeling of disappointment. One sees then that it is not so beautiful after all. This realization is in part what Socrates' questioning of Agathon is intended to accomplish. But why is it not enough that the exterior be beautiful? Why the disappointment? Is it not because the apparent beauty seemed to promise something more, some good perhaps, and when we discover that it does not, we feel as though a promise has been broken? Perhaps beauty can be understood in that way: as a promise of good.[270] At any rate, when we realize that beauty is unaccompanied by good, it inevitably loses appeal.

However that may be, Socrates' brief dialogue with Agathon has succeeded as he wished. Its rhetorical intent was to reveal Agathon as ignorant, both to himself and to the *théatron* he had created. Obviously, if eros is in need of and does not have beauty, it cannot itself be beautiful. Agathon is thus forced to admit: "It's probable Socrates, that I knew nothing of what I said" (210b). Given that we have grounds to suspect that Agathon's speech was especially designed to impress Socrates,[271] this has to be a humiliating experience – all the more so as it occurs in public. Yet he might benefit from this experience, for he has been forced to admit that he 'knows nothing', i.e., he has been raised to the level of Socratic ignorance. And as the Great Performer has been cut down to size, the *théatron* that he created has been destroyed. The men, as individuals, will now listen to Socrates' arguments.

---------- * ---------- * ----------

Having sufficiently prepared the men, Socrates is at last now ready to give them his own eulogy to Eros. But the speech he actually gives purports to be more the recounting of a dialogue *about* eros rather than a praise of it. It is a dialogue between him and a woman. It is very rare that a woman plays a substantial role in the action of a Platonic dialogue, so we might wonder why Socrates – in this all male, not to say homoerotic environment – shows himself in dialogue with a woman. According to

---

[270] Evidently, this was opinion of Thomas Hobbes: "Forme [i.e., beautiful form or beauty] is Power; because being a promise of Good, it recommendeth men to the favour of women and strangers" (*Leviathan* chap. X, par. 13).

[271] See pp. 22-23 above.

Socrates, this woman is the very one who taught him "the erotic things" (201d), about which he now claims to be expert (177e). As the dialogue to this point has clearly shown, the erotic things can plausibly be said to pertain to a wide variety of phenomena, and it is not clear that comprehensive lessons in these things could be simply 'academic'. The reported manner of how this woman and he spoke to each other, and especially her way of addressing him, suggests a more complicated relationship. In any event, the mere fact that a man being taught the erotic things by a woman reminds us of the meaning of eros in its primary sense: the intense attraction between individuals of opposite sex that serves the purpose of procreation.

The only other place in the Platonic corpus where an individual woman plays such a prominent role is in the dialogue *Menexenus*. The woman is Aspasia, who was one of Pericles' mistresses, and we learn – again second hand from Socrates – that she taught him about speech, or more specifically rhetoric (as he claims she also taught Pericles). Socrates claims in *Symposium* that a woman taught him about the erotic things, but according to his recounting, she also seems to have taught him about speech. The very first thing she says to Socrates is *ouk euphēmēseis;* – which is an idiomatic expression roughly equivalent to: 'Hush!' (201e). Evidently, she was unimpressed with his question as to whether or not eros is ugly and bad, and she lets him know it. The phrase that she uses literally means, 'Won't you speak well?' Her first words are, strictly speaking, a question. She then goes on to teach him, in effect, how to speak well. The dialogue that Socrates presents between the two of them is an instantiation of the kind of question and answer exchange that we have come to associate with Socrates, his characteristic dialectical speech. Since he presents himself as then lacking dialectical skill (e.g., 204a-b), and her assuming the dialogical role with him that he typically assumes with others (he explicitly invites us to consider the parallels between his dialogue with Agathon and her dialogue with him, 201d), his presentation of this dialogue can be understood as a statement by him on how he learned dialogue. As Socrates claims it, the two women together taught him the two modes of speech essential to political philosophy: from the courtesan Aspasia he learned rhetoric, the manly speech of politics, and from this priestess woman he learned dialogue, the feminine speech of philosophy.

There is an important difference between the two women. Whereas the woman from whom he claims to have learned in *Menexenus*, Aspasia, is an actual historical figure, this other one apparently is not. Socrates claims that "when the Athenians once made a sacrifice before the plague, she caused it to be delayed by ten years" (201d).[272] But no other record of this story is extant, and the woman is otherwise unknown to history. He introduces her as, "Diotima of Mantinea [*Mantinikēs Diotimas*]". Her name literally means 'honoured by Zeus', and her birthplace calls to mind the mantic power. If the woman is literally fantastic, then so is the whole purported dialogue between them. Presumably, she is meant to be understood, not as a real person, but rather as a fictitious creation of Socrates.[273] But the same thing could be said of Socrates in relation to Plato. While Socrates is an actual historical figure, Plato's presentation of him in the dialogues is not meant to be understood as an historical account. The Platonic dialogues are, in the words of Leo Strauss, "radically fictitious".[274] In Plato's own words, they portray a

---

[272] Since the plague occurred in 430 (Hornblower and Spawforth, p 1188), this would have occurred in 440, when Socrates was 29 years old. Given that Socrates presents himself in dialogue with Diotima as lacking his characteristic dialogical skill, we can take it that he presents himself as young, the 'young Socrates'. 440 is thus a plausible dramatic date for the dialogue(s) between him and Diotima. It is to be noted that in delaying the plague by ten years, she would have caused its onset to occur *after* the onset of the Peloponnesian War. The plague had a debilitating and demoralizing effect on the Athenian war effort, especially as Athens was, following the commencement of hostilities, overcrowded with an influx of people from the countryside (Thucydides, II, 52). This causes us to wonder whether she really was 'wise', rather than merely 'nice' or 'friendly'.

[273] Because she is apparently the creation of Socrates, evidence of his own erotic creativity, the dialogue between them is too. Socrates' speech creates a dialogue between a man and a woman. We could thus say that there is a *prima facie* case to be made that Socrates' speech is the speech of a 'man/woman', or an androgyne. As such, it would be evidence that Socrates has overcome the limitations of his sexuality, and attained the transsexual perspective that is necessary for an understanding of the human soul.

[274] Strauss *City and Man* p 60. It is worth quoting his contention in some detail, as it bears directly on the issue at hand:

> In a word, one cannot take seriously enough the law of logographic necessity. Nothing is accidental in a Platonic dialogue; everything is necessary at the place where it occurs. Everything which would be accidental outside of the dialogue becomes meaningful within the dialogue. In all actual conversations chance plays a considerable role: all Platonic dialogues are radically fictitious. The Platonic dialogue is based on a fundamental falsehood, *viz.* on the denial of chance.

Socrates who has become forever beautiful and new (*kalos kai neos, 2nd Letter* 314c). The Platonic Socrates is the perfect teacher, always engaged in "the awakening of his fellow men and the attempting to guide them towards the good life which he himself was living";[275] Plato in effect eulogizes his teacher, the historical Socrates, with the creation of the Platonic Socrates (even if this is not his main intent in creating the Platonic Socrates). This fictional teacher in turn creates his own fictional teacher in the course of eulogizing eros. Both Plato and the Platonic Socrates create fictional teachers. The Platonic Socrates is to Plato what Diotima is to the Platonic Socrates, and if we reflect on the Platonic Socrates' creation of Diotima, we may gain insight into the creative activity of Plato.

Socrates presents the teacher teaching rather than simply the lessons learned from the teacher divorced from her teaching activity. These were on, as he says, "the erotic things". We have to assume that there is a good reason why lessons on the erotic things might be best presented together with the one who teaches them. I suspect that the reason has to do with the dialogical nature of the lessons. This requires some explanation. Taking his recounting at face value, Socrates explicitly claims to have learned the erotic things from Diotima, but as I argued above, he apparently learned philosophical dialogue from her. There is an essential connection between the two. In the Platonic corpus we meet Socrates in a wide variety of situations in dialogue with heterogeneous collections of interlocutors. But no matter who the interlocutors or what the situation, he always turns out to be very much in control of things. Socrates controls his interlocutors with dialogue, and because he is able to do so consistently, this control must be by knowledge or skill of some sort, and not luck. Socrates evidently has knowledge of dialogue. This is based on the knowledge of souls, most importantly his own, but also the souls of others.[276] It is because of his knowledge of souls that he is able to anticipate what others will say and how best to respond to them so as to maintain control of the dialogue. Socrates is a knower of human souls. But the human soul is erotic. Hence, knowledge of dialogue implies knowledge of the erotic things.[277] The most important erotic things for human beings to learn about can reasonably be said to be human souls. The lessons of Diotima, on the erotic things, were accordingly mainly on the erotic character of human souls. The human soul is unique in that it alone possesses the capacity for rational speech. We have already seen that Socrates' irony and especially his praise is inseparable from his eros. Hence, there is a peculiar eroticism of the rational soul. Socrates characteristically expresses his eros in dialogue. Dialogue, the interaction of two rational souls, is among the highest erotic manifestations of the rational soul. It follows that knowledge of dialogue not only implies knowledge of erotic things, but is itself an erotic thing: the mutual stimulation of rational souls. Lessons on erotic things, to be comprehensive, must then include lessons on dialogue. Now dialogue can perhaps be 'explained' through some non-interactive form of speech, but not adequately. It can only be fully explicated in action, which means that it must be exemplified so as to be experienced, if only vicariously. Socrates cannot simply tell us about dialogue, he has to actually produce dialogue if we are to understand it. But what better way to do this than to produce the dialogues of the one who taught dialogue? Diotima is part of her lessons because to convey her lessons apart from her would remove her character from those lessons, whereas her character is itself integral to those lessons. The case is similar for Socrates and Plato. The Platonic dialogues as a whole provide lessons on the erotic things, and most importantly on the human soul; they must, therefore, include lessons on dialogue itself. But Socrates is the consummate dialectician, and hence integral to the lessons on dialogue. The Platonic dialogues teach dialogue by exemplifying it; this is one of the reasons why Plato wrote dialogues and not treatises. Plato created the Platonic Socrates in order that the character and lessons of the historical Socrates, and in particular his lessons on dialogue (his essential progeny), would live on. Of course, this requires that the reader actively participate in the dialogue, bringing it to life in his imagination.

---

[275] See n. 35, p. 26 above.

[276] This is what explains the most remarkable ability he has to draw from his interlocutors interesting contributions in dialogue on the nature of things, contributions which, owing to their psyche, they are suited to make, and why the dialogues are such pedagogically useful devices.

---

[277] The same conclusion can be reached in a more tautological fashion. Socrates claims in *Symposium* to have "expert knowledge of nothing but the erotic things" (177e). If he indeed has knowledge of dialogue, as is manifest from the Platonic corpus as a whole, then, in order for his explicit claim to be true, this knowledge must be part of his expert knowledge of the erotic things.

---------- * ---------- * ----------

Given that Diotima is to Socrates what the Platonic Socrates is to Plato, i.e., a radical fiction, we need to approach her in the same way we approach Socrates if we are to learn from either: we must try to forget for a moment the author of the character, and become totally immersed in the characters themselves; we must try to accept the reality of the fiction in its totality. The dialogue between Socrates and Diotima must then – at least initially – be read and analysed as would any other dialogue.

Socrates finds the notion that Eros is not beautiful and good hard to reconcile with the notion that he is a great god; he has the common-sense view that the gods are beautiful and good. For Diotima, however, this is not a problem; she denies that Eros is a god. To teach this to Socrates, she uses an argument that calls to mind the one Socrates just used to refute Agathon's opinion that Eros was beautiful and good, but she adds the theological principle that a god lacks nothing: Eros cannot be a god if he desires the beautiful and good things because he lacks them, yet Socrates holds that Eros must desire the beautiful and good things because he lacks them, from which it follows that Eros cannot be a god. The discussion points to a basic problem with man's religiosity (202b-d), which first surfaced in Phaedrus' eulogy.[278] On the one hand, we want the gods to be entirely above us – larger than life, as it were – which they could only be if they were lacking in nothing, i.e., if they were whole and complete unto themselves, in which case they would *not* desire beautiful and good things. On the other hand, we want them to answer our prayers and exercise their powers for our benefit, and to be interested in us, which they could be only if they were somehow like us, i.e., if they were *not* entirely beyond our problems, if they were *not* whole and complete unto themselves, or if they too desired good and beautiful things. In brief: we want the gods to be both perfect and active, but it is impossible for them to be both (cf. *Republic* 379b-382e).

Socrates assumes that if Eros is not a god, it must be a mortal (202d). He assumes that the essence of a god is immortality, which is another common-sense view. In response, Diotima makes the apparently bizarre claim that eros is between mortal

---

[278] See pp. 59-60 above.

(*thnëtoû*) and immortal (or 'deathless'; *athanátou*). This, she says, makes him a great daimon (*daímön*), "for everything daimonic [*daimónion*] is between god and mortal" (202d-e). Thus is introduced the very complex issue of the daimon, and of course, Socrates' own 'daimonic thing' (*daimṓnion*), a mysterious power which guides him always in a negative fashion, by holding back or forbidding action – or, that is all that he credits it with doing (cf. *Apology* 31c-d, 40a-c; *Euthyphro* 3b; *Republic* 496c; *Theaetetus* 151a; *Phaedrus* 242b-c; *Euthydemus* 272e; *Theages* 128d-131a). Socrates was evidently famous for his daimonic thing, famous enough that by the time of his capital trial, his accuser Meletus was able to allege his belief in it as part of the charge against him (*Apology* 24b-c). Socrates' daimonic thing is of the essence of his character, and it thus demands careful study.

Symposium makes a valuable contribution to this study, and I will point to a few of its most important features. But we first have to make explicit the connection between the daimonic thing and the eros that Socrates eulogizes. Diotima gives this mythical description of the great daimon Eros:

> First of all, he is always poor; and he is far from being tender and beautiful, as the many believe, but is tough, squalid, shoeless, and homeless, always lying on the ground without a blanket or a bed, sleeping in doorways and along waysides in the open air; he has the nature of his mother, always dwelling in want. But in accordance with the nature of his father he plots to trap the beautiful and the good [people or men], and is courageous, stout, and keen, a skilled hunter, always weaving devices, desirous of prudence and inventive, philosophizing through all his life, a skilled magician, druggist, sophist. (203c-d)

This is in fact a perfect description of Socrates himself, as he typically appears (though – as he has beautified himself for Agathon's symposium – not on this particular occasion). Diotima describes eros as Socrates; or, we could say, Socrates is the very personification of eros, eros incarnate. Socrates' daimonic thing, as a daimonic thing, has the same kind of power as the daimon eros. More simply, it is his own peculiar erotic nature; the daimonic thing *is* Socrates' eros.

Whereas the daimonic thing is typically presented as a negative kind of power, *Symposium* presents it as positive. *Symposium* is thus required for the full or complete understanding of this matter. The specific character of the positive power of the daimon, and hence of Socrates' daimonic thing, becomes evident as he continues to question Diotima. He asks her what kind of power Eros has, for if Eros is not a god, he probably does not have the power of a god. Socrates is evidently interested in the higher beings for their power. It turns out, as we might have predicted on the basis of their dialogue thus far, that Eros has a 'between' kind of power: it interprets and ferries things from gods to humans and vice versa, "for it is in the middle of both and fills up the interval so that the whole itself has been bound together by it" (202e). Eros is the glue that holds together the whole of gods and humans – or, more generally, the mortal realm and the immortal realm. To put this another way, without Eros, the gods and humans, and what pertains to each, would not constitute a whole, but rather two separate realms.

That the daimon, and hence the daimonic thing, is shown in *Symposium* as a positive rather than a negative power is a consequence of the *nomos* of the dialogue, which demands of all the men that they praise eros (177d). Eryximachus, the lawgiver of *Symposium*, introduces this *nomos* with a quote from a poet: "The beginning of my speech is in the manner of Euripides' *Melanippe*, 'for the *mythos* I am about to tell is not my own'" (177a). This introduction creates an especially close relationship between *Symposium* and *Apology of Socrates* as regards the issue of the daimonic thing. For in *Apology*, Socrates uses the exact same quote to introduce the character of the "human wisdom" that he has (*Apology* 20d), which turns out to be a daimonic thing. There are, however, these two important differences in the way the quote is used. First, Socrates alters the quote from *Melanippe* by substituting *logos* for *mythos*. The poem is lost, but the fragment appears to indicate that it provided a rational account of the origin of the world that did not rely on the gods, i.e., a *logos* rather than a *mythos*.[279] Socrates emphasizes the rational quality of both the poem and of what he will say. Second, whereas the lawgiver refers what he is about to say, his law, to Phaedrus (who is *Symposium's* representative of the original *polis*), Socrates refers what he is about to say, his account of his "human wisdom", to "the god in Delphi" (*Apology*, 20e). Everybody assumes that when he says this he is talking about Apollo, but he never actually says that. It is a mistake to make facile assumptions about just what exactly an ironist means when he speaks of "the god", especially when he is on trial for not believing in the gods of the city. The substance of Socrates' "human wisdom" is revealed in what he characterizes as his "service to the god": the relentless questioning of all those reputed to be wise, which revealed their actual ignorance (*Apology* 21a-23b). Socrates' "human wisdom" can be said to consist in his dialogical skill, or his remarkable ability to engage his fellow man in rational discourse about the nature of things – mainly refuting inadequate views – which is on display throughout the whole of the Platonic corpus. But as I have observed above, Socrates claims in *Symposium* to have expert knowledge of *nothing but* the erotic things (*tà erötiká*), which implies that his "human wisdom" must consist exclusively of his expert knowledge of erotic things, i.e., all that which pertains to the daimon Eros. We could say then that what Socrates really refers his "human wisdom" to is the daimon Eros. He mentions "the god" a total of twenty-three times in *Apology*, the same number of times *Eros* (i.e., eros deified with a capital 'E') is mentioned in *Symposium*. "The god" that Socrates serves in *Apology* is Eros. But in his eulogy to Eros, he denies that Eros is a god. In the only dialogue where Socrates ever explicitly addresses himself to the question of the nature of a god, he denies that the god is a god. Because of this god's place in Greek religion (viz. his connection to Aphrodite and Dionysus, cf. 177e) this is really as much as to deny the existence of all the gods. What Socrates ultimately serves, then, is his own erotic nature, which is ruled by an eros for *logos*, rather than by gods.

---

[279] See West and West, *Four Texts on Socrates: Plato and Aristophanes* n. 26, p. 68.

There is necessarily a conflict between the city and Socrates, for his disbelief in the gods of the city, which underwrites its laws and its way of life, is a necessary consequence of his peculiar erotic nature. He can bring all of his formidable powers of irony to bear on the problem, but in the end it cannot quite be finessed. He is justly prosecuted because his essential philosophical activity must involve a questioning of the gods, and this has a harmful effect on the city. The conflict between Socrates and the city can be stated using Diotima's erotic language as follows. Because Eros is the glue that holds together the whole of gods and humans, as a practical matter, how we conceive of it is inevitably affected by how we conceive of the two things that it holds together. As I observed above, the young Socrates assumes that if Eros is not a god, it must be a mortal (202d). He has the common-sense view, i.e., the view of the city, that gods are immortal. He has this view before his education by Diotima is finished. Immediately after he expresses it, she makes clear that she most emphatically does not have a common-sense view of gods: "A god does not mingle with a human being; but through this [i.e., the power of eros] occurs the whole intercourse [*homilia*, which can have the connotation of sexual intercourse] and dialogue [*diálektos*] of gods with human beings while they are awake and asleep" (203a). However, the common Greek view is that it is precisely the erotic mingling of gods and humans that produces the 'daimonic' heroes (*Apology* 27d-e; Cratylus 397d-398e). Thus, Diotima tacitly denies the existence of the gods and heroes as they are commonly understood. Eventually, she will speak of a different kind of god or divinity, the form of the beautiful. The mature Socrates has replaced the immortal gods of the city with the true deities, the permanent or eternal forms which account for all becoming, and hence also human life. As Diotima says, Eros "interprets and ferries things from gods to humans and vice versa", but the practical meaning of this power depends upon the meaning of the gods. Socrates' erotic nature, his daimonic thing, interprets between humans and the forms. Given that the forms are not directly active in human affairs, but rather rule them indirectly (which is supposedly what is meant by the 'intercourse' between gods and humans, *Republic* 508b-509d, 517c; cf. *Laws* 899d-905c), the 'dialogue' between the forms and humans must involve our rational contemplation of them; the rational contemplation of the forms is the means whereby we humans purposefully connect ourselves to the cosmos. The rational contemplation of the cosmos is a philosophical exercise, and Diotima will soon call the daimon Eros a philosopher (204b). This seems to be integral to the charm and power of daimonic Socrates: that he is somehow able to articulate for humans their place in the cosmos. This is of course different from articulating for humans their place in the city, and in fact it can only have the effect of undercutting their place in the city. The whole natural order is wider than the city, and in going beyond the city's boundaries, Socrates dissolves them. Since the city is defined by its boundaries, this is as much as to dissolve the city itself.

Socrates now asks who are the father and mother of Eros. This question is suggested by Diotima's assertion that gods do not mingle with humans: if semi-divine heroes cannot exist, a daimon cannot be anything like a hero. She answers him with a *mythos*:

> When Aphrodite was born, all the other gods as well as Poros [Resource] the son Metis [Intelligence] were at a feast; and when they had dined, Penia [Poverty] arrived to beg for something – as might be expected at a festivity – and she hung

> about near the door. Then Poros got drunk on nectar – for there was not yet wine – and, heavy of head went into the garden of Zeus and slept. Then Penia, who because of her own lack of resources was plotting to have a child made out of Poros, reclined beside him and conceived Eros. (203b-c)

This is a rather ugly story: the father was dead drunk and the mother was only scheming to escape poverty. We have to consider what the implications of this are for how we understand Socrates' speech. We must recall in this connection his principle of praise: that one selects the most beautiful parts of the truth and arranges them in the seemliest manner. In doing so, it becomes apparent that it is difficult to construe this mythical genealogy as consistent with his principles of praise. Why then is it included in this eulogy to eros?

It would be necessary to speak of a non-beautiful aspect of eros in a eulogy to eros if this was required in order to make intelligible that for which eros *can* be praised. Eros has this character, and the explanation for this is connected to its status as a power. Socrates and Diotima have just finished discussing the power of eros, and if there is one simple teaching that clearly emerges from each of the eulogies to eros, it is that it is a power. Hence, in order to understand eros, we have to consider the nature of power per se. Socrates defines power in *Republic* as follows:

> [P]owers are a certain class of things by means of which we are empowered of what we are empowered, and also everything else is empowered of whatever it is empowered. For example, I say sight and hearing are powers… In a power I see no colour or shape or anything of the sort such as I see in many other things to which I look when I distinguish one thing from another for myself. With a power I look *only* to this – *on what it depends and what it accomplishes*; and it is on this basis that I come to call each of the powers a power; and that which depends on the same thing and accomplishes the same thing, I call the same power, and that which depends on something else and accomplishes something else, I call a different power. (My italics, *Republic* 477c-d)

Any given power is essentially defined by two things: that upon which it depends, and what it accomplishes. Diotima's mythical genealogy tells us something about the nature of the power of eros in particular. It does not, however, tell us anything about the genealogy of eros.[280] Her *mythos* taken as a whole is, of course, false. This is to be expected inasmuch as *mythoi* are (as defined by Socrates) stories that are, taken as a whole, false, but that nonetheless contain truths within them (*Republic* 377a).[281] The truth that her mythical genealogy actually conveys is not the origin of eros, but rather that upon which it depends as a power.[282] Her mythical genealogy provides an account of one of the two defining attributes of the power eros, which is evidently not beautiful. We can infer that what is beautiful about it is what it accomplishes.

---

[280] Other than that there cannot be a genealogy of eros. Eros cannot be descended from gods, for according to her theology the gods do not desire beauty and goodness, i.e., the gods are not erotic. Nor can eros be descended from mortals, for its generation would then itself be erotic. The 'parents' in this *mythos*, then, cannot actually be parents. Eros

Eros depends upon its 'parents', i.e., this particular power depends upon the nature of Penia (poverty) and of Poros (resource). An examination of the description of Eros quoted above shows that it depends "first of all" on want: in accordance with the nature of the mother, it is "always dwelling in want" (203d).[283] This makes it tough and never satisfied, never really at peace. Eros is accordingly inured to any and all manner of hardship, and always scrapping to get more. Satisfaction kills it. To be truly satisfied is to be like the unerotic gods who, being beautiful and good, have no need of beauty and goodness. In addition, Eros depends upon resource, not as an end in itself, but as instrumental to the attainment of what it wants. This would seem to be what the father supplies. Yet Poverty is herself not without resource[284] in Diotima's story, for she is

---

as a principle of generation cannot itself be a generated thing. Eros cannot have parents, and it is therefore among the very oldest. Socrates actually agrees (contrary to appearances) with Phaedrus on this crucial point (see pp 40-41 above).

[281] See p. 164-165 above.

[282] Or rather, one of the truths. There are others. Diotima presents the association of Eros and Aphrodite as incidental rather than integral. The meaning of eros as sexual congress is captured in mythological terms by this association, as in Pausanius' eulogy. Her *mythos* then implies that there can be eros without sexual congress, or that eros goes beyond sexual congress. The fact that Diotima goes out of her way to tell us that there was no wine suggests that there was no Dionysus, the god most closely associated with both wine and unbridled sexual activity. The common view of Eros associates it with Aphrodite and Dionysus (cf. 177e), and she undercuts this view, thus facilitating her own close association of Eros with the more obscure gods Poros and Penia, which in turn facilitates a more rational account of eros. However, as Eros is born in the garden of Zeus, her *mythos* still maintains a connection with the Greek pantheon, i.e., a connection between eros and religiosity.

[283] Thus we can understand Socrates' claim to live in "ten-thousandfold poverty" because of his "devotion to the god" (*Apology* 23b-c). Socrates was of course poor, but the real significance of his poverty is that it bespeaks his extremely erotic nature.

[284] 'Without resource', *a-poria*, is more or less synonymous with poverty: one who is poor lacks resources or means. It should be noted that the term 'aporia' denotes the crisis

resourceful enough to plot successfully to get a child made out of Resource. If what eros essentially depends upon is poverty and resource, then what is essential would seem to be supplied by the mother. We have to look a little closer to see what the father contributes. The *sine qua non* of eros is its want of the beautiful and the good. But the mother is not beautiful, and Diotima gives no indication that she is directed to the beautiful. By contrast, the first thing that Diotima mentions about the father is his directedness to the beautiful and the good. This is what the nature of the father supplies.[285]

The mythical genealogy explains what is seemingly impossible to explain: how eros can be between mortality and immortality, as well as the enigmatic claim that all philosophy is learning how to die (for Diotima says eros is a philosopher, 204b):

> sometimes on the same day [Eros] flourishes and lives, whenever he has resources; and sometimes he dies, but gets to live again through the nature of the father. (203e)

Eros is eros when it is resourcefully directed to the good and beautiful, but as these resources are constantly "flowing out", it "dies". But when this happens, it gets to live again "through the nature of the father" *because* the mother has found a way to 'get resource', and once again give birth to eros. It is between mortality and immortality in the sense that it is perpetually being born, living and dying.

It is in the nature of Eros never to be wealthy (*ploutei*), because it always spends what it has, nor without resource, because it is always able to get more. The implication of this would seem to be that Eros is between wealth and poverty. But Diotima interprets it to mean that eros is between wisdom and lack of understanding (203e). As she earlier made the same claim for correct opinion (*orthë dóxa*, 201e-a), she implicitly equates eros with correct opinion (and has evidently contrived to do so). This marks the

---

point in a dialogue: where the dialogue reveals that the opinion at issue in it contains a contradiction, and that hence the opinion cannot be true or correct opinion, while at the same time revealing that the interlocutors have no means (or are 'without resource') of resolving the problem and moving forward. The so-called 'aporetic' dialogues refer to the dialogues where this apparently occurs. When this happens, a way to escape the crisis (or to 'get resource') is needed. This is what the nature of the mother supplies.

[285] It should also be noted that the father is said to be courageous and directed to wisdom. Through the nature of the father, eros is associated with two of the five cardinal virtues. The genealogy does *not* associate eros with justice, moderation, and piety.

end point of the 'between' theme that has been running through her argument since the beginning.

The first thing that Diotima taught Socrates was that Eros is neither beautiful nor good, from which he infers her to mean, apparently incorrectly, that Eros is ugly and bad. According to Diotima, it is possible for something to be between beautiful and ugly, and similarly between good and bad, just as it is possible for there to be something between wisdom and lack of understanding. This train of thought calls to mind the discussion of philosophy at the end of Book V of *Republic*, where Socrates distinguishes the philosophers (lit. 'lovers of wisdom') from the lovers of sights and the lovers of hearing (475d-480a). The true philosophers are lovers of the sight of the truth, such as the beautiful itself and the just itself, i.e., the forms or ideas of things. Only these things are fully knowable because only these things are always the same in all respects; only these things fully *are*. The lovers of the many sights and sounds believe that there *are* many beautiful things, but cannot endure it if anyone tries to say that the beautiful itself is one. The many beautiful things that they love *are* not fully, but are rather somewhere between what purely and simply is and what in no way is. They are 'between' in the sense that they participate in both simultaneously, and are in constant flux, so that it is not possible to think of them fixedly "as either being or not being, or as both or neither". Because of this, the many things ultimately will always appear both as what they are said to be and the opposite of what they are said to be. Every beautiful thing, for example, must also look ugly in some sense. Eros, Diotima explicitly says, is between beautiful and ugly, and good and bad (202b); if we interpret this in light of the ontology of *Republic*, it means that eros must appear both beautiful and ugly, and good and bad (*Republic* 479a-b). It is a between thing, and a power pertaining to the many things between being and non-being. Eros then is not fully, and, as such, is not fully knowable. In terms of the ontology of *Republic*, there can be no idea or form of eros. In implicitly equating eros with opinion, Diotima indicates that it is not fully knowable. In locating eros between what in no way is and what is fully, she locates eros in the realm of Becoming. All life is, of course, becoming. But only living human beings have opinions about all manner and variety of things, including, perhaps most importantly, how to live well; in implicitly equating eros with opinion, she narrows the focus to distinctly human life. In implicitly equating it with specifically *correct* opinion, she points to the natural human directedness to the truth. Some of the opinions that human beings hold are correct, and some incorrect. *Ceteris paribus*, the more correct their opinions, the better the lives they live. Philosophy can be thought of as nothing more than the effort to exchange opinions for knowledge. Whereas human beings in general can hold, and benefit from, correct opinions, only philosophers seek to exchange these for knowledge. Thus, only philosophers are fully aware of the problematic character of knowledge, and only philosophers can be non-dogmatic about the solutions to human problems, even while steadfastly adhering to whatever solutions reason seems to affirm as best. Because of this peculiar openness, philosophers can be expected to live the best lives.[286] In calling Eros a philosopher, Diotima means to indicate that philosophy is the highest form of eros, or of human life (204a-b).

If that which the power eros depends upon is not beautiful, then it must have whatever beauty it does have in respect of what it accomplishes. What it accomplishes can only be understood in terms of its object, that to which it is directed, the 'beloved'. As I have observed, it is natural, especially for the lover, to equate eros with the beloved, because the lover has eros *for* the beautiful beloved (204b-c). The remainder of the dialogue between Diotima and Socrates will be about the objects of our eros, and how it connects us to them.

---

[286] René Descartes gives an eloquent account of why this disposition can be expected to endow the one who has it with a better life. It is the second maxim of the provisional 'code of morals' by which to live that he said he formulated for himself, and which he implicitly recommends to his readers:

> My second maxim was to be as firm and resolute in my actions as I could be, and to follow with no less constancy the most doubtful opinions, once I have decided on them, than if they were very certain. In this I would imitate travelers who, finding themselves lost in a forest, ought not to wonder this way and that, or, what is worse, remain in one place, but ought always walk as straight a line as they can in one direction and not change course for feeble reasons, even if at the outset it was perhaps only chance that made them choose it; for by this means, if they are not going where they wish, they will finally arrive at least somewhere where they probably will be better off than in the middle of a forest. And thus the actions of life often tolerating no delay, it is a very certain truth that, when it is not in our power to discern the truest opinions, we ought to follow the most probable; and even if we observe no more probability in some than in others, nevertheless we ought to fix ourselves on some of them and later consider them no longer as doubtful, insofar as they relate to practical affairs, but as very true and very certain, since reason, which has caused us to make this determination, is itself of the same sort. And this insight was capable, from that point onward, of freeing me from the repentance and remorse that commonly agitate the consciences of these frail and irresolute minds that allow themselves to go about with inconstancy, treating things as if they were good, only later to judge them as bad. (*Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy* Part Three, par. three)

Socrates asks Diotima: "If Eros is of this sort, of what use is he for human beings?" (204c). He is asking what eros accomplishes for human beings. To answer that, Diotima has to explore the nature of the objects for which we have eros. She asks him: "He who loves the beautiful things loves – what"? Socrates answers, "that they be his". This response is however, incomplete, and so she persists: "But the answer still longs for the following sort of question:[287] what will he have who gets the beautiful things" (204d)? Here Socrates is stumped. And it is indeed perplexing. Yet notwithstanding this fact, we are all more or less attracted to beauty. This points to a very strange aspect of our nature: that we can know what we want without knowing why we want it. Because Socrates is baffled, Diotima changes the question for him, making it pertain to the good things instead of the beautiful things. When she does this, Socrates is no longer stumped – he answers that those who have the good things will be happy (*eudaimön*).

Diotima responds to Socrates' answer by saying:

> That is because the happy are happy by the acquisition of good things; and there is no further need to ask, 'For what consequence does he who wants to be happy want to be so?' But the answer is thought to be a complete one. (204e-a)

She reminds us here of the simple fact that everything we do we do for the sake of something. Practically speaking, all human action is directed towards a plurality of instrumental goods. We seek gainful employment, for example, so that we can earn money. But there is obviously nothing intrinsically good about money – we seek money because it is good for buying the things that support life in various ways. Upon reflection, it is clear that all the practical goods that we seek point to higher or more comprehensive goods, and that these, in turn, point to still higher or more comprehensive goods. This sort of thought process seems to point to a final human good, one that comprehends all instrumental goods. Diotima suggests that this final human good – 'that for the sake of which' all human action is undertaken – is happiness. We do all that we do ultimately because we desire to be happy.

---

[287] Strictly speaking, an answer does not long for anything. It is the person who hears the answer that longs for an answer to a further question if she thinks that the first answer is incomplete. The way that she talks reminds us that there is a kind of eros inherent in *logos*.

This brief exchange between them draws out the difference between good and beautiful things, and so causes us to think about the relationship between the good and the beautiful, especially as it pertains to human action and happiness. I have already suggested a connection between the two: that the beautiful is a promise of good.[288] In that case, there is ultimately no conflict between them, as the beautiful is actually directed toward the good. But we have reason to doubt. Whereas in *Republic* Socrates speaks as though the good is supreme, in *Symposium* his Diotima speaks as though the beautiful is supreme. In the capstone of his eulogy, which is the capstone of *Symposium's* eulogies to eros, he has her say:

> 'Whoever has been educated up to this point in erotics, beholding successively and correctly the beautiful things, now going to the perfect end [*telos*] of erotics shall suddenly glimpse something wonderfully beautiful in its nature – that very thing, Socrates, for whose sake alone all prior labours were undertaken …' (210e)
>
> . . .
>
> '… and at last to know what is beauty itself. It is at this place in life, in beholding the beautiful itself, my dear Socrates', the Mantinean stranger said, 'that life is worth living, if – for a human being – it is worth living at any place. (211c-d)

And whereas she suggests to the young Socrates that the final end of all human action is happiness, she never actually says that he who reaches the final end of the education in the beautiful – that "for whose sake alone all prior labours were undertaken" – will be happy. The closest that she seems to come to such a statement is with the assertion that

> only here, in seeing the way that the beautiful is seeable, will he get to engender not phantom images of virtue – because he does not lay hold of a phantom – but true, because he lays hold of the true; and that once he has given birth to and cherished true virtue, it lies within him to become dear to the god. (212d)

But there is no guarantee of a constant connection between virtue and happiness, as would make the virtuous man necessarily happy. In marked contrast to *Republic*, where the end of the philosophical education or ascent is clearly connected with happiness (e.g., 518a-b), it never is in *Symposium*. In fact, the only time happiness is even mentioned in the dialogue between Socrates and Diotima, other than in the above discussion of happiness as the end of human action, is in reference to the god as happy (202c). In sum, putting *Republic* and *Symposium* together raises for us the disquieting possibility that in fact there is no *final* end or *telos* of human action. 'Disquieting', because if there is a final end of human action, then there is at least a *possibility* that human beings can live whole and complete lives. But what if we do *not*, in fact, ultimately do all that we do for the sake of happiness? What if there is something else, or 'more', and this 'more' is to be found in the answer to Diotima's unanswered first question? If we are by nature directed to both the beautiful and the good, and if these are, for us, not in harmony – if there is indeed a conflict between the beautiful and the good – then it is the fate of human beings to live conflicted lives, forever divided against themselves. It could even be that this lack of harmony is the root cause of human ills. If it were the fate of human beings to live divided lives, then an illusory or transient wholeness – which is exactly what the poet creates – might be the most that we can possibly hope for.

---

[288] See pp. 241-242 above.

---------- * ---------- * ----------

Accordingly, Diotima now to introduces poetry into the discussion. She obtains Socrates' agreement that this "wanting and this eros are common to human beings, and all want the good things to be theirs always" (205a). But this is a purely formal statement, one that glosses over all the very real differences in what substantially people want. So she presses on. Given that everyone wants good things always, why is it "that we deny that everyone loves" (205b)? Socrates can only wonder (*thaumázō*)[289] at this, and so Diotima proceeds to answer her own question:

> Well, don't persist in your wonder; for we detach from eros a certain form [*eîdos*] of eros and give it the name [eros], imposing upon it the name [*ónoma*] of the whole; but in other cases we misuse [or, 'miscolour'; *katachrōmetha*] other names. (205b)

We often call a whole by the name of what is only a part of the whole. In doing so, we generally imply that we deem that part to be the most important, or defining, part of the whole. The example that Diotima gives to illustrate this tendency is 'making' or 'poetry' (poetry, *poiēsis*, literally means 'making' in Greek). According to her,

---

[289] See n 103 p. 93 above.

> every kind of making is the cause for anything whatsoever that is on the way from what is not to what is. And thus all the productions that are dependent on the arts are makings [poetry], and all the craftsman [*dēmiourgoì*] of these things are makers [poets]… But nevertheless, you know that not all craftsmen are called makers [poets], but have other names; and one part is separated off from all the makings [poetry] – that which is concerned with music and meters – and is addressed by the name of the whole. For this alone is called poetry; and those who have this part of making [poetry] are called poets. (205b-c)

Just as we call only a certain part of eros 'eros' (namely, sexual activity), we call only a certain part of poetry 'poetry'. The reason for this has to do with beauty. The various artisans *make* good things, i.e. various useful things, but it is not generally the case that these things must appear beautiful (although they may incidentally appear so). By contrast, those whom we call poets (makers), at least in the case of the tragic poets, *must* make what appears beautiful, for tragedy necessarily fails as tragedy if it is not perceived as beautiful. The creations of the poet seem to be beauty for the sake of beauty. Moreover, the poet is a 'pure' maker, for he seems to create his poem out of 'nothing', as it were; unlike the other 'makers', he uses no natural 'stuff' in creating his beautiful works other than his own creative psyche.[290] The analogy indicates that the part of eros that is called 'eros' is likewise the part that is concerned with *making* beautiful things out of nothing other than psychic energy, and that this is the defining part of eros. Lovers and poets are each so called because they make or pursue beauty for the sake of beauty. Tragic poetry and eros are the same in respect of their directedness to the beautiful. This is why tragic poetry seems to be best suited to express the experience of eros in a manner that actually does justice to its beauty. The parts of *Symposium* that do the greatest justice to the actual experience of eros are surely the Aristophanes and Socrates/Diotima speeches, and each of these are – properly understood – both beautiful and deep and painful tragedies. This suggests that the beauty associated with eros is tragic.

Of course, it was the tragic poet Agathon who first made the connection between eros and poetry an explicit theme, and who availed himself of this connection to such popular success in his eulogy. We should recall here that Agathon claimed that Eros was a poet (maker) of such wisdom that he could make poets (makers) out of anyone he touched. Eros, he said, is wise in the making of the animals and the making of the arts, i.e., the poet is wise in the things of nature and in the things of the arts. Agathon claims a general competence for poetry, which, if true, would seem to make the poet the natural teacher and ruler of mankind (196e-b). Diotima seems to concur that eros can be understood as a kind of making (e.g., 206b). As I have tried to show, it is an implication of her 'between' argument that eros is one of the many things between being and non-being, i.e., it is part of the realm of becoming. When she speaks in the above quote about what is on the way from what is not to what is, she is talking about becoming. In effect, she says that making is the cause of all things that 'become'. If the most important and defining part of making is the making of beautiful things, then the poet is the most important maker. The making of beautiful things, poetry, is the highest expression of eros if: a) becoming is valued above being, and b) the beautiful is valued above the good (assuming that there is indeed a conflict between the human pursuit of the good and of the beautiful, which possibility I argued above we are meant to consider). Both valuations are characteristic of the poet qua poet, and their effect would be to render the poet superior to the philosopher.

---

[290] Though this is something of an illusion, since the poet relies upon an established language, and imitates a given world.

The poet qua poet is the best poet, but the particular poet Agathon is not a very good tragedian. His poetry is only apparently beautiful, and actually hides a deeper ugliness.[291] The best poet is the comedian Aristophanes, the apparent ugliness of whose comedy actually hides a deeper beauty.[292] The deeper beauty was the expression that he was uniquely able to give to the actual experience of men and women in love by using the poetic metaphor of lost halves seeking to become whole again through loving union. It is not Agathon, but rather Aristophanes, who most effectively creates the poetic illusion of wholeness. This is why, when Diotima turns to attack the poet, as is necessary in order for philosophy to assert and maintain its supremacy, it is Aristophanes and not Agathon that she attacks (205d-e).

She attacks his good, the good of one's own, as the partisan of the good simply:

---

[291] Owing to his self-centred (see pp. 206-206 above) ignorance (see pp. 240-242 above).
[292] See pp. 163-164 above.

> 'And there is a certain account [*lógos*]', she said, 'according to which those who seek their own halves are lovers. But my account [*lógos*] denies that eros is of a half or of a whole – unless, comrade, that half or whole can be presumed to be really good; for human beings are willing to have their own feet and hands cut off, if their opinion is that their own are no good. For I suppose that each does not cleave to his own (unless one calls the good one's own and belonging to oneself, and the bad alien to oneself) since there is nothing that human beings love other than the good. (205d-e)

The context makes it clear that she is referring to Aristophanes, as we really recognize his account of lovers as lost halves trying to find happiness by becoming whole again through loving union with another. He in effect confirms this, for as Apollodorus tells us, "Aristophanes tried to say something, because Socrates in speaking had mentioned him and referred to his speech" (212c). Aristophanes is the only person we are told tried to respond to something Socrates said. These facts establish a special connection between the speech of Socrates and that of Aristophanes. Aristophanes is prevented from pressing his case because of the dramatic appearance of the uninvited Alcibiades. He is on the verge of beginning what would have been a fascinating and (to say the least) challenging conversation with Socrates, but is cut short by the upheaval attending Alcibiades' arrival. This seems to be a clear invitation from Plato to try to imagine what these two men might have said to each other.

I have already begun an analysis of what is at issue between them in the Aristophanes section above, where I described the reasons for, and the nature of, his attack on Socrates, together with Socrates' response.[293] With Diotima's attack on Aristophanes, the position of Socrates comes into sharper focus, and our understanding of the debate between philosophy and poetry deepens. As we have seen from Aristophanes' eulogy, the good of one's own requires that one's own be made to appear better than it is, i.e., it requires beautification.[294] This is because we want what is our own, the whole of our own, to be good. In an effort to make it good, to make it better, we beautify it. But there is generally no reason to presume that what is our own is good, as Diotima reminds us through her simple appeal to experience. We are indeed willing to cut off even our limbs, if we think that they are no good. What is one's own either is or is not good, and the fact of its being one's own does not affect its goodness. In the name of the good simply, she exposes, and so destroys, the beautiful illusion, i.e., Aristophanes' beautiful poetic illusion that what is one's own is better than it really is.

---

[293] See pp. 176-180 above.

[294] See pp. 175 and 184-187 above

Yet if we think carefully about the above quote, we see that there is more to it than that. The case of the human who is willing to cut off his hands and his feet if they are "no good", is actually quite complicated, and so too is the issue of the good of one's own. For *why* would anyone be willing to cut off his hands and feet? Is it not *precisely* because they are no good *for him*? Infected hands and feet must be cut off because they threaten the whole body with infection, they threaten death; anyone who cuts them off does so because he wishes to preserve *his* life. '*My* life is good *because* it is *my* life'. This is the instinctive sentiment from which the good of one's own grows, and it supports life as such. Illusion supports the purposes of life. The point of the philosophical attack on poetry is not so much to destroy poetic illusion, as it is to clarify its natural basis. This philosophic inquiry into the natural basis of poetic illusion is really an inquiry into the value of poetic illusion. The good of one's own, what Aristophanes promotes and beautifies, is at least as good as the good of life itself, inasmuch as life is impossible apart from one's own (starting with one's own body).

The above comments have the effect of lessening the tension between poetry and philosophy: if philosophy inquires after the natural basis of poetic illusion, if it connects illusion to the requirements of life, then it does not so much attack poetry as support good poetry. As I indicated in my discussion of Socrates' response to Aristophanes' attack, he has great poetic ability.[295] There we saw how his use of poetry with Phaedrus shows this, and the effectiveness with which he uses it in the service of politics shows that he understands the role of poetry in politics, and hence that he understands poetry and politics. This understanding is supposedly based on his philosophising about poetry and politics. And we see further evidence of his poetic ability here, with his creation of the utterly fantastic Diotima, who he uses to provide his beautiful poetic account of philosophic eros. As a philosopher who exercises poetic ability, poetry is for Socrates instrumental to his philosophical purposes. This instrumental poetry, because it is purposefully grounded in nature, provides a greater support for politics than does the non-instrumental poetry of Aristophanes. Socrates would thus argue that poetry must be integrated into philosophy if it is best to serve the purposes of life.[296]

---

[295] See pp. 178-180 above.

But it remains a question as to whether or not it is indeed possible to elucidate the natural basis of poetic illusion without destroying it.[297] The problem turns precisely on the philosophic appeal to nature – which is ultimately an appeal to nature simply rather than specifically *human* nature. As we have seen, for Aristophanes there is a tension between nature simply and specifically *human* nature,[298] and Aristophanes would not agree that poetry could be supported by philosophy without being destroyed by it. Plato continues to elucidate the nature of this tension with Diotima's education in the beautiful, which is meant to replace Aristophanes' understanding of beauty as 'by man' rather than 'by nature', and to which she turns next.

---------- * ---------- * -----------

Immediately after her attack on Aristophanes, Diotima gets Socrates to agree that it is to be said "unqualifiedly that human beings love the good", i.e., the whole good, or the good simply. Diotima champions the good simply, and she attacked as the partisan of the good simply. But immediately upon obtaining the above agreement, she modifies it by getting Socrates to agree also that all human beings love the good *to be theirs* (206a). As Aristophanes championed one's own good in his eulogy, it might sound as though she is now bringing her argument closer to his. But it is actually quite different, and the difference can be captured as follows: whereas the philosopher insists that we all want the whole good to be ours, the poet insists that we all want our whole to be good.

---

[296] Thus, according to Strauss,

> the wisdom of the Platonic Socrates is superior to the wisdom of the poets: the truth discerned by the poets must be integrated into the all-comprehensive truth with which the philosopher is concerned; or the true knowledge of the souls, and hence of the soul, is the core of the cosmology (of the knowledge of the things aloft). (*Socrates and Aristophanes* 314)

[297] Given the close connection between politics and poetry, i.e., given that politics and poetry are simply coeval (see pp. 154-157 above), this is practically equivalent to the question of whether or not philosophy can elucidate the natural basis of poetic illusion without destroying the city. One of the most important political problems Plato addresses in *Republic* is how

> a city can take philosophy in hand without being destroyed. For surely all great things carry with them the risk of a fall, and, really as the saying goes, fine things [*tà kalà*] are hard [or 'difficult', 'painful'; *chalepá*]. (497d; cf. 467b)

[298] See pp. 176-177 above.

Her argument raises a problem. If eros is love of the good, and of having the good, and if all human beings are characterized by this love, then all human beings are erotic, and all human actions are expressions of eros. But not all human actions are called 'erotic':

> 'Since eros is always this [i.e., people love the good things to be theirs]', she said, 'then in what manner and in what activity (*práxei*) would the earnestness and intensity of those who pursue the good be called 'eros'. What in fact are they doing when they act so? Can you tell?' (206b)

As Diotima seemed to ask virtually the same question at 205b, the answer to that question was evidently inadequate. As we saw there, the answer involved the fact that the lover is directed to beauty, much as is the poet.[299] But Diotima has to this point not provided any substantive indication of what she means by 'beauty', and so that answer could not have been complete. Accordingly, she now begins to develop her idea of beauty. This is her education in the beautiful, which begins in the very centre of the Socrates section of *Symposium* (206b). It begins with the answer to the above question, which she supplies because Socrates is again unable to answer: "Their deed is bringing to birth in beauty both in terms of the body and in terms of the soul" (206b). Erotic people love that the good be theirs, and when they act erotically, they are bringing to birth in beauty. The essential *purpose* of erotic action is the attainment of the good; the essential *medium* of erotic action is the beautiful. As the beautiful is integral to erotic action, and as erotic action is directed to the good, the beautiful is also directed to the good. Diotima understands the beautiful in terms of the good. This is part of her criticism of the poets: whereas they understand the beautiful as an end in itself, it is actually instrumental to the good.

Socrates still does not understand her meaning, and so she elaborates on what she has said. It turns out that all human beings, both men and women, "conceive both in terms of the body and in terms of the soul", and give birth. Diotima thus eliminates the essential distinction between men and women as such. Eros is of course in its primary sense closely related to birth, and she appeals to that, but in eliminating the distinction between men and women, she prepares the way for a sexless understanding of eros. Since this must involve a certain forgetting of the body, it is a sublimation of eros. This is an augur of things to come. She explains the activity of eros as follows. Because we want the good to be ours always, we must want immortality. Pregnancy and bringing to birth is the divine and immortal in the mortal animal (and hence somehow beautiful). Our eros for the good then drives us to pregnancy and bringing to birth. Because only the beautiful is fitting for the divine, the pregnant gives birth only when it is near to beauty. So whenever someone who is pregnant draws near to one who is beautiful, he rejoices and gives birth (206c-a). The erotic person is not merely desirous, like one who hungers for food, but is actually in a sense overflowing. It follows that eros cannot be thought of simply as bodily desire, and this is why she abstracts from body in explaining it. The erotic human being has not merely a need to take, but also a need to give.

---

[299] See pp. 259-260 above.

This is a strange thing, for it means that eros may push us to do things that are contrary to our own particular good: one can give to the point where it drains. This strange thing follows directly from Diotima's understanding of eros: that it is, at bottom, desire for the good simply, rather than for one's own good. Again, Aristophanes championed one's own good, and not the good simply, in his eulogy. Aristophanes' eulogy showed that eros for one's own good implies a desire for one's own immortality.[300] As we have seen, Socrates implicitly draws the same conclusion.[301] Since this is obviously impossible, it is irrational. Diotima seems to see the same implication (206a and 207a), but this leads her to alter the meaning of the desire. She interprets the desire for immortality to be a desire for an end that *is* possible, thus transforming it into a rational desire:

> Mortal nature is capable of immortality only in this way, the way of generation, because it is always leaving behind another that is young to replace the old. (207d)
>
> . . .
>
> For in this way every mortal thing is preserved; not by being entirely the same forever, as the divine is, but by the fact of that which is departing and growing old leaving behind another young thing that is as it was. (208a-b)

---

[300] See pp. 185-187 above.
[301] See p. 240 above.

It is in the nature of the mortal being that the only possible way that it can participate in immortality is by participating in the continual process of birth, life, and death (cf. Aristotle *On the Soul* 425a23-b8). In her hands, the desire for immortality becomes a desire not for the immortality of one's own self, but rather of one's own *type* or species, which desire is rational inasmuch as its end is consistent with nature and hence possible. Eros for the good simply seems to lead to rationalism. In any event, as a consequence of her alteration, we now have two different ways of interpreting the desire for immortality: a) as the irrational desire for one's own immortality, which is associated with eros for one's own good; and b) as the rational desire for the immortality of one's own species, which is associated with eros for the good simply.[302] Because this dialogue is about eros, i.e., about a part of becoming, the good is given expression in terms of becoming: the desire for the immortality of one's own species is a representation of the form of the good.

But the relationship between these two desires for immortality is not simply dichotomous. One sees eros for the good simply even in the brutes, who have no reason or *logos*.[303] They put their lives at great risk, first of all in sexual congress, then in pregnancy, and then in rearing what has been brought to birth. None of this is for the direct good of the brute that does it, but in this way the brute participates in immortality in the sense of the continual process of birth, life, and death (207a-c), i.e., in the 'rational' way. Diotima's point in raising the issue of what the brutes do is that the desire for the immortality of the species is indeed simply natural. All erotic beings display a natural or instinctive willingness to forgo their own individual good in favour of a wider good in which they participate. This includes human beings. The brutes, of course, are mostly compelled by instinct to act in accordance with their natures, whereas we humans have greater freedom of action because of our rational souls. Our reason can either frustrate or support our natural erotic instinct. It is an often observed fact that children may be seen by parents as some sort of 'social security' for their old age. But this observation does not really get at the issue. Such parents act 'rationally' in a sense – from a certain kind of calculation – but then they do not act erotically in the sense that Diotima is here puzzling over. It is just as valid an observation that many parents do not see their children in this way, and that many would die for their children in a heartbeat, just as (she claims) the brutes do; this phenomenon is real, and must be explained. Action of this sort seems to be intrinsically beautiful or noble, and parental willingness to sacrifice for offspring perhaps constitutes the primary or original beauty or nobility of the living thing. Because of this, an explanation of action of this sort is a kind of education in the beautiful.

---

[302] Of course, in a very real sense this is still eros for one's own, because the good of our species is, as *our* species, still the good of one's own. But the good of one's own as the good of our species is the good of one's own stretched beyond original recognition. It is an open question as to what extent anyone can actually identify with such a good. In any event, Diotima widens the good of one's own, to make it more comprehensive, to make it closer to the whole good, or the good simply. In doing so, she brings the poet and the philosopher closer together. To repeat, the philosopher wants the whole good to be his, whereas the poet wants his whole to be good. As the whole that the poet wants to be his and good becomes wider, he necessarily becomes more philosophical. At the extreme, the whole that he wants for his own would be everything, and he would be a philosopher – a 'poet-philosopher'.

[303] The mention of the brutes reminds us that eros is not a uniquely human phenomenon. Human eros, Diotima implies, can only be understood within the context of a wider natural order.

In explaining why we as erotic beings act this way, one must address the fundamental nature of the erotic being. Diotima has just told us that the individual erotic being – whether human or brute – is willing to sacrifice for its offspring, and thus for the larger whole, or the species, in which it participates. But why would an erotic being do this? And if it would, what must that imply abut the nature of the being? If I am – as an erotic being – like this, then what does this tell me about myself? I must wonder about myself in order to answer this; I must wonder about what makes me me; I must wonder about that in which my identity consists. But none of the commonly available formulations of identity seems to comport very well with eroticism as Diotima understands it. This much is clear: I cannot – as an erotic being such as she describes – conceive of myself as at bottom an isolated individual. I must rather, by my very constitution, be connected to some larger whole. As the nature of this connection is opaque, perhaps the only way that I can find my true identity is by doubting the things that common sense tells me makes me 'me'. This is, at any rate, the exercise to which Diotima now turns. She forces the reader to consider the problematic character of the individual identity:

> For while each one of the animals is said to live and be the same (for example, one is spoken of as the same from the time one is a child until one is an elder; and though he never has the same things in himself, nevertheless, he is called the same), he is forever becoming young in some respects as he suffers losses in other respects: his hair, flesh, bones, blood, and his whole body. (207d-e)

Everything mortal lives only by constantly changing. She observes that, though the mortal is never the same, it is nonetheless referred to as the same from birth to death. What accounts for that? The changes Diotima mentions above are all bodily changes. They remind us of Eryximachus and his bodily eros, with its attendant 'repletions and evacuations', and the endless motion of matter 'through' the living thing. If the living thing's identity cannot be said to inhere in its body, perhaps then it inheres in its soul. But this too is not constant; speaking in the case of man:

> And this is so not only in terms of the body but also in terms of the soul; his ways, character, opinion, desires, pleasures, pains, fears, each of these things is never present as the same for each, but as things coming to be and things perishing. (207e)

Perhaps then his identity inheres in the highest part of his soul, i.e., in his rational soul. But that does not work either: [304]

> And what is far stranger still is that in the case of our sciences too not only are some coming to be while others are perishing (and we are never the same in terms of the sciences either); but also each single one of the sciences is affected in the same way. For studying, as it is called, is done on the grounds that the science is passing out from us; for forgetfulness is the exiting of science; and studying, by instilling a fresh memory again to replace the departing one, preserves the knowledge, so that it may be thought to be the same.[305] (208a)

Diotima seems to say that every conceivable aspect of our being constantly changes. But if that is true, then what is the 'I' upon which this change is predicated? That it should be so difficult to locate our individual identity – even once we have applied ourselves to the problem – is something of a shock, because (barring some sort of serious psychological disorder) we begin with the certainty that we indeed have one. Perhaps this is why Socrates says that he was "amazed" upon having heard Diotima's speech (208b). And perhaps also this is why he says she is like the perfect or complete sophists (*téleo*

---

[304] For an interesting exploration of this problem, see Nietzsche *Beyond Good and Evil* aph 16.

[305] Of course, the knowledge itself does not change; it is the knowing that is necessarily dynamic.

sophistai, 208c), for an account of eros that assumes rather than explains the one who loves smacks of sophistry.

If we think about the puzzle that she has presented, we see that we are each of us constantly dying. Perhaps her intention in teaching us this is to make us fear death less. However that may be, if we look within ourselves, we find of course not only that we are dying, but also being born, i.e., we find *within ourselves* the continuing cycle of birth, life, and death, or the larger Pattern of Life. Diotima reveals a deep continuity between our own existence as individuals and that of the species within which we exist. In effect, she assimilates the immortality of the individual and the immortality of the species within which it participates.[306] Diotima clearly invites us to think less of our own good and more of the good of the species.

As I have argued,[307] these two goods lead to two different ways of understanding the desire for immortality: a) as the irrational desire for one's own immortality, which is associated with eros for one's own good; and b) as the rational desire for the immortality of one's own species, which is associated with eros for the good simply. Because the human animal can reason and understand that it participates in some larger whole, it is driven to wonder and worry about its place in that whole. All thought about one's place in the whole issues in two closely related consequences, which correspond to the desire for one's own individual immortality, and to the desire for the immortality of the species. In the former case, the consequence of thought about the whole is a desire to take from the whole; in the latter, it is a desire to give to it. Because of the human capacity for reason, one can give and take in a number of different ways. Diotima's now considers this issue in terms of five things: beautiful deeds, children, virtue, poems, and laws.

Diotima gives three examples of beautiful deeds that resulted in immortal fame (208d). We recall that Phaedrus also gave three examples of great sacrifices which resulted in immortal fame: Alcestis was willing to die for her husband, Orpheus was willing to descend into Hades for his wife, and Achilles was willing to die for his lover (179b-180b). Phaedrus' basic argument was that eros (i.e., the eros between lover and beloved) "implanted", better than anything else, a "love of honour" (*philotimia*) in the face of "beautiful things" (*toîs kaloîs*), so that one whom eros had entered would be directed toward virtue, to the point where he was "like one who is best by nature" (178c-a). "Beautiful things" can be used to refer to the sort of great and impressive deeds which men praise, and about which the poets write their beautiful stories and hence immortalize. In Diotima's analysis, the psychology that explains the execution of beautiful deeds is in a sense much more direct: some people do them simply because they love honour.

---

[306] Though the individual and the species are *dis*analogous in this crucial respect: the individuals that the species is composed of are erotic, whereas the matter that the individual is composed of is not.

[307] See pp. 266-267 above.

But the psychology of this love of honour bifurcates roughly along the lines of the analysis of the desire for immortality, which can be understood either in terms of the desire for the immortality of the species, or in terms of the desire for one's own immortality.[308] The first involves a desire to the give to the whole, the second a desire to take from it. To consider the first, the beautiful deeds for which we are honoured constitute our involvement in a whole that stretches on beyond our death. Diotima says: "I suppose that all do all things for the sake of immortal virtue and a famous reputation of that sort; and the better they are, so much the more it is thus; for they love the immortal" (208d). She mentions immortal virtue and famous reputation in the same breath, which implies that for her they go together. And, as a practical matter, by and large they naturally do. Famous reputation *should* be attendant upon great and beautiful deeds born of virtue. Virtue is goodness in the human, and when it shines forth in action that both benefits and exalts the human it is praiseworthy and hence properly and justly praised.[309] The three beautiful deeds Diotima uses to illustrate her point are Alcestis' willingness to die for her husband, Achilles' willingness to die for his lover, and Codrus' willingness to die for the sake of his sons' kingship (208d).[310] What these examples have in common is that they all involve a person who was willing to die for the good of others. Death is the ultimate sacrifice, and as such, it brings the issue into sharp relief. For Diotima, the essence of the virtuous deed is that it involves a certain denial or forgetting of self, or at least it involves behaviour that somehow transcends self; virtuous behaviour is behaviour that is not simply self-regarding. The virtuous deed becomes immortal, because in benefiting or giving to others, it lives on after the one who does it has died. Thus, "immortal remembering" properly attends "immortal virtue". But the fame is in this case only incidental. If we somehow knew that Alcestis died, not in order to save her husband's life, but rather merely in order to obtain a famous reputation, her deed would seem less admirable – indeed, it might even seem perverse.

---

[308] The love of honour is a characteristic expression of the spirit or *thumos*, which is identified as one of the parts of the soul in the tri-partite psychology of Plato's *Republic*. The psychology of the love of honour bifurcates because

> the spirit itself has two parts. There is a lower half, more akin to that found in animals; it is an instinctively selfish part, in which is seated a love of one's own and the familiar, and a hostility to the strange. And there is a higher, more distinctly human half, that takes pleasure from order and beauty and power and harmony as such, irrespective of their further bearing on one's own immediate welfare. (Craig, 104)

That the *thumos* has two parts is never explicitly claimed in *Republic*, but its division into two seems to be indicated in various ways. As it is initially developed in the psychology of *Republic*, its primary aspect is the desire for victory (*niké*, where the *thumos* is associated with the 'good fight' and the just victory, and is hence allied with the struggle for justice, 439e-d). But it soon becomes clear that this love of victory is associated with the desire for fame or honour (*timé*, e.g., 468c-e). Socrates asks Glaucon: "If we were to designate [the thumotic part of the soul] victory-loving and honour-loving, would that strike the right note" (581b)? Glaucon agrees. This suggests that we can think of the *thumos* as being divided into a higher (nikocratic) and a lower (timocratic) part, as determined by which of these two loves is strongest and hence rules within it (cf. Craig, 109). Putting *Republic* together with *Symposium*, we can think of the nikrocrat in terms of desire for the immortality of the species, or as one who loves the good simply, and of the timocrat in terms of the desire for the immortality of self, or as one who loves his own good.

Yet there are indeed some for whom the fame is the main objective. This is the love of honour that originates in the desire for one's own immortality. It is a desire to take from the whole in which one participates, rather than to give to it; people who seek to live on as individuals through immortal fame, to achieve the adoration of those who are yet to come, seek, in effect, some sort of tribute from the greater whole. If they had some way to get the fame without exercising the virtue that properly produces it, they would presumably be every bit as satisfied.

---

[309] Cf. pp. 228-229 above.

[310] Diotima substitutes Codrus, a semi-mythical figure in Athenian history who died in order that his sons might be established in kingship, for Orpheus (see Hornblower and Spawforth, p 355). Phaedrus blamed Orpheus because he had a plan to go into Hades alive, i.e., for not being willing or 'willing enough' to die. His interpretation of the story shows the gods likewise blamed him. Because he is not eagerly willing to make the ultimate sacrifice, he is for Phaedrus a poor example of the power of eros. In switching Codrus for Orpheus, Diotima seems to show that she agrees with this assessment. And certainly, nothing works so well for the attainment of immortal fame as the willingness to die nobly.

The latter love of honour is actually derivative from the former, as we can see by imagining the thought process behind it. We have the galling thought that just a few short years after we have lived and died we will be utterly forgotten – gone without a trace, as if we had never existed in the first place. We grasp hold of this depressing thought with our reason, but then again our reason tells us that it is an unreasonable thought to have. For we will be dead, and so why should we care whether we are remembered or not, spoken of well or poorly? This is what Diotima alludes to in telling Socrates, "you would be amazed at [human] irrationality unless you understand what I have said" (208c). It is difficult to see how a concern with what happens after we are dead and gone – and hence the desire to immortalize ourselves through fame – can be explained other than in the way that Diotima does, i.e., by recognition of some sort of largely instinctive awareness of our existence as part of a greater whole. As both psychic impulses can generally be found behind the execution of beautiful deeds, and as they are not necessarily in harmony, there may be a tension between the virtue of the deed, which is its goodness, and the praise of or fame for that deed, which is a beautiful reflection of it.[311]

Beauty can be attractive even apart from the goodness that it reflects, but it is foolish to succumb to beauty apart from goodness (which is what the poet does). We see this especially clearly in the case of the second of the five things Diotima considers as contributions to the whole: children (209e). We can analyse children in terms of the bifurcated love of honour developed above. Children can, of course, be understood in terms of a largely instinctive desire for the immortality of the species: the most common way in which people participate in the cycle of birth, life, and death is through bodily pregnancy and bringing to birth. But our children could really only be said to be a positive *contribution* to the species if they are *good.* The species only *progresses* if the latter generations are indeed *better* than former ones. Our children are true testaments to our virtue when they are themselves virtuous. This is why the glory of the son always casts the father in a good light, as one who could sire and raise a son worthy of glory. But it is foolish for a father to attempt to attain glory through his son. The father that raises his son with a view to his own immortality, or to his own benefit, is apt to fail in making him virtuous, in which case whatever glory he chances to attain through him would be vainglory. The healthy father thinks rather of the benefit of his children, and this generally involves some sacrifice rather than gain. Codrus sacrificed his life in an effort to secure the future of his children, *not* his own.

---

[311] It is interesting to consider in this connection the tenth paragraph of chapter 11, entitled "Of Man", of Hobbes' *Leviathan*, to which he attaches the annotation, "Love of vertue from love of praise":

> Desire of praise disposeth to laudable actions, such as please them whose judgment they value; for of those men whom we contemn, we contemn also the praises. Desire of fame after death does the same. And though after death, there be no sense of the praise given us on earth, as being joyes, that are either swallowed up in the unspeakable joyes of heaven, or extinguished in the extreme torments of hell: yet is not such fame vain; because men have a present delight therein, from the foresight of it, *and of the benefit that may redound thereby to their posterity*: which though they now see not, yet they imagine; and anything that is pleasure in the sense, the same also is pleasure in the imagination. (my italics)

"Prudence and the rest of virtue", the third and central thing that Diotima considers, is the only one that cannot be understood in terms of a desire for immortality of the self (209a-c). Virtue was for the Greeks the specific excellence of a thing. To inculcate human virtue amongst humans can thus only be a positive contribution to humanity. Virtue may be inculcated amongst humans through education. As she explains the education in virtue, one who is pregnant in soul with virtues goes around searching for a suitably beautiful one within which to generate and give birth (209b; cf. 206e). When he finds one who is suitably beautiful in body and soul, he is at once fluent in speeches about virtue – "of what sort the good man must be and what he must pursue" (209b-c). This is a capsule description of the sort of education with which Socrates occupied his life. The philosopher provides the education in true virtue. This is the benefit that Pausanius was trying to claim for his practice of pederasty. This private education results in great and strong friendships, because the 'children' that are produced by it – virtue and speeches about it – are more beautiful and immortal than any other children (209c). And as she will soon make clear, the private education leads on to the form of the beautiful. It is important to understand that, although these children are immortal, they are not generated by the philosopher teacher and student for the sake of fame, they are generated for the sake of virtue. There is nothing intrinsic to the private education provided by the philosopher that leads to fame. What Diotima describes is an essentially private phenomenon, which implies that educators properly so-called are private educators.

This observation amounts to an implicit criticism of all public education. Poets – because dependent upon public ratification of their work for their success – are *essentially* public creatures. The poets are the public educators *par excellence*. The poets provide an education in public or civic virtue, which is at best an imperfect education in virtue, but which develops the character of the city. Homer and Hesiod virtually define "Greekness". The way Diotima mixes the discussion of the private and public education, it sounds as though the poets leave behind children similar to those left behind by the philosophers, but they do not. The children they leave behind are their poems. One "envies" Homer and Hesiod, she says, for the "children" they have left behind: "For as these offspring are in their own right immortal, they supply the poets with immortal fame and memory" (209d). The fame is deserved to the extent that the education provided by their poems is a salutary one. Homer and Hesiod are rightly immortalized to the extent that their poetry can be said to have elevated and cultivated the Greeks, or to the extent that it lifted them above the barbarians. But there is actually a sharp criticism of poetry here, for Diotima implies that the desire for their own immortality is more important to the poets than virtue, or at least that it is more important to them than it should be; it is, at any rate, far more important in the case of their providing public education than in the case of the private philosophical education.

This is connected to the fact that the poets, as opposed to the philosophers, always work within the context of a given political framework and are hence bound by it. But whence this political order? It is established by the lawgivers. The discussion of poet as educator naturally leads to the fifth thing Diotima considers as a contribution to the whole: the laws of the lawgiver (209d-e). In contrast to the poet, who leaves behind poems, the lawgiver leaves behind laws as immortal remembrances of himself. The lawgiver is something of a mean between the philosopher and the poet. The lawgiver is motivated by a concern for his own immortal fame, but he must also have a great concern for virtue, for if his laws do not actually inculcate virtue, they will not benefit citizens and city, and his regime will be defective. The lawgiver must to some extent be philosophical. He cannot be simply bound by the cave of the city, for he creates it. In doing so, he must go through an exercise of mind similar to the one Socrates goes through with Glaucon and Adeimantus in *Republic*: he must consider the philosophical problem of the good or best regime. But he cannot be fully philosophical because he is still tied to the regime that he creates, for it is *his* creation, and as such, loved by him as the poet loves his poems (cf. *Republic* 330c).

The psychology of the love of honour developed above bifurcates, as I have said, along the lines of the desire for immortality, which can be understood either in terms of the desire for the immortality of the species, or in terms of the desire for one's own immortality. But the fifth thing Diotima considers as a contribution to the whole, the laws of the lawgiver, causes us to consider how wide is the whole with which human beings can really identify. The laws are defining attributes of the polity. It may very well be that the largest whole with which people can really identify is indeed the city. If this is the case, then we have to consider the ramifications of this realization for how we evaluate the love of honour. I will attend to this matter below.

---------- * ---------- * ----------

Diotima at last turns to the culmination of her instruction, that for the sake of which everything precedent has been merely preparatory, her account of the beautiful itself, or, to borrow language from the ontology of *Republic*, the form of the beautiful. She lends gravity to the moment with comments that have the effect of making us eager to reach the culmination:

> … if one were to proceed correctly on the way – I do not know if you would be able to be initiated into them. Now I shall speak, she said, I shall not falter in my zeal; do try to follow, if you are such as can. (210a)

This is the same language Socrates uses in leading Glaucon to an understanding of dialectic (*Republic*, 533a). Socrates calls the journey up out of the cave, and towards the vision of the good, dialectical (*Republic*, 532a). I have argued that eros for the beautiful can be understood as directed towards the good,[312] and the remarkable similarity of language used to introduce both the beautiful and dialectic suggests that they serve a similar purpose with respect to the good. The lesson in the beautiful is itself a journey, and it is one that involves an ascent. It is worthwhile to consider this journey in some detail, as it actually elucidates the character of the private philosophical education.

---

[312] See pp. 241-242 above.

The journey begins with beautiful bodies. The beauty of bodies is likely to be the first beautiful thing by which a human being becomes aware of the power of beauty. This is the usual way of Plato, to begin with what is closest to common experience, most mundane, and most readily apparent and seemingly trivial. It is implicit in this general procedure that all the rarest, divine and most important things are somehow implied by these lower things. And it is a virtue of Plato that he thereby discourages us from the temptation to philosophical 'flights of fancy' that have no connection to the world in which we live. It would be a strange conception of 'the beautiful' which did not apprehend the beauty of bodies, and the possibility of this strangeness is precluded because the ascent to 'the beautiful' begins with beautiful bodies. He treats as important things that other philosophers dismiss out of hand. The beauty of a body is said to be 'skin deep', but it remains beautiful nonetheless. The first step in the ascent to the beautiful is for the lover to love one body and there to generate beautiful speeches. The love of the body requires that the soul within must be addressed with speeches; the body points beyond itself to the soul. To be true to the beauty of the body, the lover must generate beautiful speeches. The second step is from one beautiful body to more beautiful bodies, and to all beautiful bodies. The morality of this step is questionable, but the logic is sound. To understand the beauty of the body, the lover has to see that it is beautiful because it participates in beauty, in 'the beautiful'. The simplest and most direct way to do this is to take two beautiful bodies and compare them, and ask: in respect of what do I say these two bodies are beautiful? And then to repeat the exercise with another, and another, until one comes to understand that "the beauty that is in any body whatsoever is brethren to that in another". The inevitable consequence of this exercise is that the lover slackens his eros for any particular beautiful body, for in understanding that any given body is beautiful only because it participates in a larger beauty, he must come to regard that individual beauty as petty.

Once this happens, he is prepared for the third step, which is to see past the body to the beauty of the soul, to see the soul itself (rather than to see the soul for the sake of the body), even if that soul happens to be encased by an only slightly beautiful body. With eros for the soul, the lover comes to the fourth step, which is to make it better with speeches, in order that the lover himself may see the beautiful in pursuits and laws. Diotima does not say exactly what she means by this, but in pursuing beauty by following the steps that she prescribes, he is doing so in what could be described as an ordered and lawful kind of way. Perhaps she means he is to see the beauty in that. In any event, the ability to recognize the beauty in pursuits and laws requires a purely rational understanding of beauty, and so it points to the sciences. With the fifth step, the lover of beauty comes to see the beauty of the sciences. The sciences are the means by which we grasp what is wholly knowable, namely unchanging permanent being. And now, in beholding the vast open sea of the beautiful, the lover gives birth to "many beautiful and magnificent speeches and thoughts". Whatever else she may mean by this, it implies a kind of psychic gymnastic, by means of which the lover is strengthened. Having been thus strengthened, he ascends to the sixth step, which is to discern a single science, whose object is the beautiful itself (210a-e).[313] This is the form of the beautiful, through the power of which the beauty of all beautiful things exists.

From the way that Diotima talks about the beautiful, it seems as though she has actually experienced it (210e-b), which must mean intellected it. But it may be that her description of the form of the beautiful is the result of a synthetic judgment, i.e., that she has examined all the beautiful phenomena, including the manner in which they come into being and pass away, and putting it all together she has determined that something like what she describes as the form of the beautiful must be necessary. In that case, the description that we have of the form of the beautiful from her would be her own creation, i.e., her own beautiful poetry. The language that she uses to describe the form of the beautiful is surpassingly beautiful, and is only rivalled within *Symposium* by Aristophanes' beautiful mythical expression of the experience of love. There is a reason for this. As I have said, whereas the poet wants his whole to be good, the philosopher wants the whole good to be his. Because the poet wants his whole to be good, he beautifies it. He is able to succeed at rendering his whole good, to the extent he does, because the power and appeal of beauty cannot be denied. Hence, in order to establish its total supremacy, it is not sufficient for philosophy to attack poetry in the name of the good; it must also *demonstrate* a superior understanding of the beautiful, and especially a *creative* understanding that can issue in superior images of beauty (cf. 216e-a). As a creation, Diotima's image of the form of the beautiful would accomplish this, for it is itself seemingly of surpassing beauty.[314]

---

[313] There are six steps in Diotima's ascent to the beautiful, and there are six eulogies in *Symposium* to eros. One wonders if the steps are intended to somehow correspond to the eulogies.

---------- * ---------- * ----------

But whether she has intellected the form of the beautiful and describes for us what she has intellected, or has made an image of it, she is confident that it is here, if anywhere, that life is worth living (211d). She presents the philosophical life as a highly erotic life, which has as its reward and fulfilment a consummation in the greatest beauty, the form of the beautiful. This raises a profound problem. The philosophical experience of the beautiful as she describes it is, while altogether wonderful, debilitating and probably even fatal:

> What then, do we believe happens to one, if he gets to see the beautiful itself, pure, clean, unmixed, and not infected with human flesh, colours, or a lot of other mortal foolishness, and can glimpse the divine beautiful itself as being of a single form [*monoeidés*]? Do you believe that life would prove to be a sorry sort of thing, when a human being gazes in the direction of the beautiful and beholds it with the instrument with which he must and is together with it? (211e-a)

To be "unmixed" and "not infected with human flesh colours or a lot of other mortal foolishness" may indeed be divine, but it is also to be dead. And it is precisely the problem with the preoccupation to which Diotima is exhorting us that it makes life "prove to be a sorry sort of thing" (and this is part of the reason why Aristophanes blames and ridicules Socrates).

The philosophical experience of the beautiful as described by Diotima can only make the more mundane eros for the beautiful seem comparatively trivial and mundane – "a sorry sort of a thing". Its practical effect is to lessen the significance of the here and now, and this can only detract from the dignity of political life in general. In the end, we see that Diotima cannot possibly take political life seriously enough, for to do so, one must be preoccupied with mortal affairs, and not dismissive of "mortal foolishness". One who cannot take political life seriously enough cannot generate and execute practical solutions to enduring political problems, for these require not only wisdom but also engagement, and it is impossible to be sufficiently engaged in what one does not regard as important enough to justify engagement.

---

[314] She thus creates the impression that the form of the beautiful is itself beautiful. It may, however, be that the *truth* about the "single form" (*monoeidés*, 211b and 211e) of the beautiful is beautiful, but not the form itself.

Part of Socrates' purpose in presenting his education at the hands of Diotima was to provide an account of how he became 'Socratic'.[315] The teachings of Diotima are thus integral to the proper understanding of Socratic philosophy. Because of the extent of the diminution of the political indicated by the capstone of her teaching, the form of the beautiful, we must conclude that no solution to the enduring political problems can be found in the character of Socrates. This conclusion comes as something of a disappointment, for the political trajectory or 'story' that is told by the speeches of *Symposium* seemed to indicate that such a solution was indeed a possibility.

The heart of this story is in the gods. Briefly to reiterate it, Phaedrus' speech corresponds to the first city, wherein the laws are accepted in an unquestioning fashion, which they could be only if they are seen as unequivocally good. This in turn requires that they be understood to come from gods, or god-like men, or at least men who were closer to the gods than those of the present. This first city must actually be good in some sense, for it at least exists as a unified whole, and is therefore a city which is animated by a viable principle of justice. But precisely because the people of this first city are unreflective about law and authority, they are especially vulnerable to people who are reflective about them, people like Pausanius. Succumbing to this vulnerability, the first city devolves into the city which someone like Pausanius engenders: the city characterized by an awareness of the artificial or man-made character of convention and the laws. This implies of course an awareness of the man-made character of the gods. Whereas in the first city the good is equated with the ancestral, in the devolved city the good is equated with pleasure. The approach to the laws in this city is motivated by the calculus of 'rational self-interest', and the good from which this calculus takes its bearings is pleasure. But because the political good can only plausibly be stated as the general or common good, political debate in this city is inherently sophistical. Eryximachus also ultimately understands the good as pleasure. He represents a further devolution of the city, but this time it occurs through a *techne* that serves above all else the needs of the body, and is guided by bodily pleasure. Eryximachus presents a technical and materialistic understanding of erotic man and eros generally. It thus provides an intellectual framework wherein there is no place for man as man, rather than man as matter. And as it attributes fundamental reality to body rather than soul, there is no place for the gods in it either. Because of this, it is inherently amoral and apolitical. Between them, Pausanius and Eryximachus represent the two roots to which virtually all political sickness can be traced: sophistry and (bodily) hedonism. Following them comes the attempted rehabilitation of politics through poetry. Aristophanes begins with an attempted rehabilitation of the gods. His speech is an appeal for piety. In showing why the gods are necessary for the healthy development of our erotic natures, he shows why the gods are necessary for healthy politics. But he sees only the man-made character of the gods, and does not acknowledge anything higher upon which they could be based. Because of this, his poetry cannot be sufficient to compel the piety of citizens who are already aware of the man-made character of the existing gods. Perhaps then the solution lies in the creation of novel gods rather than the rehabilitation of existing ones. This is what the poetry of Agathon accomplishes. He creates a new god, named Eros, which is now supreme. This might work if the new god could compel both belief and respect. But it cannot; it is not awesome, and too obviously a flight of fancy – based as it is on nothing more than Agathon himself. This shows the practical problem with the creation of new gods: *very* few 'creators' can pull it off. For most who attempt it, it is an exercise in vanity.

---

[315] But this account is not the final word on the subject. He also discusses the issue in *Apology of Socrates*, *Phaedo*, and *Parmenides*, and the four accounts must be integrated for a complete understanding of how he became Socratic.

Against this background, perhaps then the philosopher could have provided the basis for the gods of the city by explaining how the gods are indeed ultimately based on something higher than man's poetic abilities; perhaps he could have succeeded where the great comic poet failed. And the philosopher did indeed provide an account of something truly divine and beyond man, which one could suppose might form a viable basis for the gods of the city: the form of the beautiful. The forms are for Socrates the true deities, and the gods of the city could be justly respected insofar as they are intelligible images of these deities. But this requires a gifted 'maker' of such images. Having only Diotima's description of the form of the beautiful, it and other such forms are too far removed from actual human experience to be practically relevant.

The gods can be understood as mortal man's way of reconciling the experience of eternity, to which he has accesses through his rational soul, with the awareness of the finiteness of life that is forced upon him by his body. The experience of eternity begets a desire for immortality (which is an approximation of eternity, or infinity in time). As we have seen, the poetic good of one's own is a response to the unreasonable desire that men have to be immortal as individuals.[316] But this too human desire is too petty and too irrational to be respected by Socrates. The only desire for immortality that he can respect and hence support is the desire for the immortality of the species.[317] But the desire for the immortality of the species is too far removed from the experience of the vast majority of individual human beings to be meaningful to them. 'Humanity' is simply too wide or large a human good; all pious rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding, the vast majority of human beings do not actually care enough about it for it practically to influence how they live. The largest or widest human good with which they can practically identify is some political grouping, be it city, nation, race, etc. But the polity is at bottom nothing more than a (beautified) extension of the body, or of the individual embodied existence (as we saw from Aristophanes' speech). Hence, Socrates cannot really sufficiently respect and support the city either, except as the environment of philosophy, hence of genuine virtue.

The problem can be illustrated with a consideration of family, which is, as we have seen, the medium in which specifically *human* reproduction and eros occurs. As we saw, we can view our progeny in two ways, which correspond to the desire for the immortality of the self and the species. I drew a contrast between sick and healthy parents in these terms,[318] but probably all parents can be characterized as seeing in their children at least some of their own immortality. For the parents who genuinely care for their children, and who are willing to sacrifice for them, must envision a future for them. The future that the parents envision is not foreign to them, but rather one that they recognize. It is thus a future that occurs within their own city (or in more modern language, within their own political milieu), or perhaps an improved version of it. Parents that are dedicated to the good of their children thus identify with the good of their city (or their 'adopted' city). But then they see in their children the preservation of the city, and the desire for the immortality of the city is an extension of the desire for the immortality of the self. The human form of eros brings children into being through family, and family exists, as we have seen, partly by convention, by the laws of the city, and not simply by nature. Codrus, the example that Diotima substitutes for Phaedrus' Orpheus, was willing to die for the good of his sons, and this meant establishing them in kingship, which could *only* redound to his own "immortal fame". This is because the good of his sons, his family, is bound up with the good of the political order within which his family has meaning. We remember Codrus' sacrifice today to the extent that we remember Greece; we do not remember Codrus as a 'human being'. Socrates cares for the good of the human species, he desires the 'immortality' of the human species, but in the end this does not translate into sufficient care for the medium within which the human species reproduces: family and city. It is certainly germane to note in this connection that he was notorious among his contemporaries for being a poor husband and father, and for caring more for the sons of other men than for his own. In order to care sufficiently for family and city, he would have to care more for the immortality of self, he would have to take with greater seriousness the unreasonable demand of the individual to live forever, for beautiful immortal fame. The city is finally inseparable from the desire for fame, and Socrates is himself finally indifferent to it.

---

[316] See pp. 240 and 266-267 above.

[317] Which is associated in Diotima's speech with the whole good or the good simply. See p. 270 above.

We can cast the same problem in more specifically psychological terms as follows. The desire for fame, for this surrogate immortality of self, is rooted in the thumotic or spirited part of the soul, and more precisely in the timocratic part of the spirit.[319] Socrates claims, as I have often noted, to have expert knowledge of nothing but the erotic things (177d). It follows that he can have adequate knowledge of the thumotic only if it is somehow apprehended by the erotic. Socrates' Diotima presents eros as the fundamental psychic motor; she tries to explain everything about the human being in erotic terms. This seems to work well enough for the appetitive and rational parts (especially as revealed in her discussion of praise) of the soul, but it seems most problematic for the spirited part. Her account of the desire for fame really presents it as a kind of stupidity, which seems inadequate. Perhaps then the part of the thumos that seats the desire for fame is in Socrates not sufficiently developed. To say this more precisely, Socrates seems to be wholly preoccupied with virtue and hence wholly nikocratic, and not at all timocratic.

---

[318] See pp. 273-274 above.

Diotima implicitly criticized the poets for being too concerned with fame, and not enough with virtue (209c-d), or for being too timocratic. This criticism of the poets surely must be applied reflexively. Plato also wrote books – might we not suspect him of being motivated by a desire for immortal fame? He has probably achieved it more than any other single human being in the history of humanity. Is he then, after all, like the poets? This question immediately causes us to wonder about his teacher. Why did Plato write books, whereas Socrates did not? This question, in turn, forces upon us a curious realization: if Plato and Xenophon had not written books about Socrates, we would not know about him. Socrates has achieved immortal fame only through the efforts of Plato and Xenophon, which also means, of course, that we have access to Socratic *philosophy* only because of Plato and Xenophon. The preservation of philosophy, as opposed to actual philosophic activity, requires of the philosopher that he be concerned with his own immortal fame, if only instrumentally (cf. *Republic* 489a, 496a-496a, 535c, 536c, 539c-d). It is Plato and Xenophon, and not Socrates, who protected and propagated philosophy with their books. This suggests the following: Socrates did not write books because he was insufficiently thumotic, whereas his students Plato and Xenophon did because they were more thumotic.[320]

---

[319] See pp. 271-273 and n. 308 above.

[320] Cf. Strauss *On Plato's Symposium* 245-250.

We have seen that the political story of *Symposium* shows that there is no solution to the political problem to be found in any of the eulogies to eros. Perhaps then there is one to be found in the remaining speech, the eulogy to Socrates.

10 Alcibiades

> *Don't you also share my supposition that the blame for the many's being harshly disposed towards philosophy is on those men from the outside who don't belong and have burst in like drunken revellers, abusing one another and indulging in a taste for quarrelling, and who always make* ad hominem *arguments, doing what is least seemly in philosophy?*
>
> (Republic *500b*)

Just when we think everything has been said and done, the story takes an unexpected turn. Based on the seating order, Socrates is the final 'scheduled' speaker of the evening. His eulogy to eros would seem to be the natural capstone for all the arguments about eros, and hence its conclusion would seem to be the natural conclusion to *Symposium*. But the orderly sequence of eulogies to Eros happens to conclude in what seems to be a most disorderly way. For suddenly, this civilized little party is disturbed by a loud hammering at the door. The partiers hear Alcibiades shouting in the courtyard, apparently roaring drunk, and asking after Agathon. Then the man himself appears from outside, led by a flute girl and other attendants. He is thickly crowned with fillets of ivy and violets. He and his entrance constitute quite the spectacle.

Upon being informed by Eryximachus of the plan of the evening – that each man speaking in turn was to eulogize Eros – Alcibiades protests that he cannot praise anyone, "whether god or human being", in Socrates' presence, else Socrates will not keep his hands off him (214d). So he sets about praising Socrates in what he warns will be an artless kind of way, speaking "one thing and then another", because his drunkenness will make it hard to speak fluently and orderly (215a); that is, he says he intends to praise Socrates in much the same way Socrates said he intended to praise Eros (199b). The eulogies to Eros thus conclude in a eulogy to Socrates.

The reader of course has to wonder why that is. As it turns out, there is an important sense in which a eulogy to Socrates is at the same time a eulogy to eros. I have argued above that dialogue is perhaps the highest manifestation of human eros.[321] If it is, then Socrates, as the greatest dialectician, is the most fully erotic human being. Thus, no discussion of eros per se is complete apart from a discussion of Socrates' eros. He is aptly the very personification of eros. This is reflected in Diotima's description of

---

[321] See pp. 27-29 and 245-246 above.

Eros (203b-a), which turns out to fit Alcibiades' description of Socrates himself. We find echoes of that description throughout this final speech. Socrates is daemonic (219b-c). In accordance with the nature of the father of Eros, Socrates "lies in ambush" to trap the beautiful (213b-c), is a skilled sophist (214d), and is courageous (220d-b). And in accordance with the nature of the mother, he is tough and shoeless (212b-c). Finally, at the end of the dialogue, after having spent the whole night at the symposium, he spends the rest of the day at the Lyceum, and then goes to take his rest at home (223d): he goes home only to sleep, which means that he does not really have a home, i.e., he is homeless, again in accordance with the nature of the mother. Thus, one can see in Alcibiades' eulogy to Socrates a eulogy to eros; but, of course, more literally, it is a eulogy to Socrates. So, Alcibiades' eulogy both is and is not a eulogy to Eros. He both obeys and disobeys the governing *nomos* of *Symposium* that eulogies be given to Eros. For this reason, he both is and is not a part of the party, and the manner of his late entrance and subsequent acceptance reflects this.

---------- * ---------- * ----------

Alcibiades will, he says, speak only the truth. This claim seems to gain credibility because, whereas he challenges Socrates to check him if he says anything false (if he so wishes, that is; 214e-a), Socrates never does.[322] And Alcibiades' claim certainly seems generally to ring true, as much of what he says in praising Socrates comports with what we know of the man from the rest of the Platonic corpus. Because of Alcibiades' special and close relationship with Socrates, he has a privileged perspective on him, and his praise thus offers an invaluable insight into the character of Socrates. Moreover, given the closeness of this relationship, in praising Socrates, Alcibiades will inevitably reveal much of the truth about himself.

Alcibiades' strategy is to praise Socrates through likenesses. The 'fluency' and coherence of his eulogy must raise some doubt about how inebriated he really is. He observes that Socrates might think (and, I would add, anybody might) that he is doing so in order to raise a laugh, for the things he likens him to are somewhat ridiculous: satyrs and sileni.[323] But, he says, the likenesses are for the sake of the truth. Alcibiades first likens Socrates to the crafted sileni of artisans (215a-b). Socrates is like a piece of artifice that imitates something mythical, which would seem to suggest that he is not quite natural. But it could also suggest the sense in which he is *humanly* natural, for as the first political philosopher, he is the first philosopher to comprehend the specifically *human* being, i.e., the being for whom it is natural to make both myths and artefacts, the being who brings forth both poets and artisans. Be that as it may, these man-made, market-place sileni are ugly on the outside, but when opened up, one sees that they contain images of gods within; Socrates has a repulsive exterior that hides (and protects?) a beautiful and divine interior. The sort of beauty that he is talking about could only be a beauty of soul. Alcibiades has a cultivated sense of intelligible beauty.

---

[322] The fact that he never does can be interpreted as his silent ratification of the veracity of Alcibiades' speech, but not with certainty; he might wish to remain silent for other reasons.

He mentions three ways in which Socrates is like the satyrs and sileni. First, he is like them in looks. The truth of this is apparently self-evident. Second, he is like them in being hubristic. He does not elaborate what he means by this, but apparently this is evident to anyone who knows him. The way that Alcibiades says it, however, his hubris is connected to the third way in which he is like them: he is a flute player. The flute music of Marsyas, even when played by a sorry sort of flutist, causes possession and reveals those "who are in need of the gods and initiatory rituals" because it is divine (215b-c). Marsyas then is daemonic, inasmuch as he mediates between gods and humans (202e-a). The likeness between Marsyas and Socrates suggests that Socrates is also daemonic, which of course as the personification of the daemon Eros, he must be. But the daemonic music of Socrates comes simply with bare words, rather than with the aid of a flute; Socrates must be even more daemonic than Marsyas. His speech causes the hearer, "regardless of whether a woman, man or lad", to be "thunderstruck and possessed", and this even if it is merely repeated by others, who may or may not be good speakers (215d). *Symposium* provides evidence of the truth of this, for Socrates' speech is powerfully charming even though it was conveyed to us by two fairly ordinary speakers: Apollodorus (who we see in dialogue at the beginning of *Symposium*) and Aristodemus (who is not even called upon to deliver a eulogy to Eros).[324]

---

[323] These are strange "imaginary male inhabitants of the wild, comparable to the 'wild men' of European folk tradition, with some animal features, unrestrained in their desire for sex and wine, and generally represented naked." But while apparently ridiculous, their nature is ambiguous in this regard:

> Analogous to this contrast is the ambiguity of the satyrs as grotesque hedonists and yet the immortal companions of a god [Dionysus], cruder than men and yet somehow wiser, combining mischief with wisdom, lewdness with skill in music, animality with divinity.

The words satyr and silen are interchangeable; silen is Attic/Ionic, satyr is Doric. See Simon and Hornblower, 1361.

Yet Alcibiades cannot be quite right about the power of Socrates' speeches, for not all who hear his speeches are "thunderstruck and possessed", but only some with noble natures. The politician Alcibiades says: "even now I know within myself that were I willing to lend my ears, I should not be capable of holding out, but should be affected in the same way" (216a). But the politician Anytus lent him his ears, and was not at all affected in this way (*Meno*, 89e-94e). Far from it: Anytus was the driving force behind the instigation of capital charges against Socrates (*Apology*, 18b).

Alcibiades' tells us that the speeches of Socrates cause his soul to grow "troubled and become distressed at [his] slavish condition" (215e). His slavish condition consists in his not being able to follow through on what argument reveals to be best: Socrates compels him to admit that, "though I am still in need of much myself, I neglect myself and handle instead the affairs of the Athenians" (216a). This is a partial definition of a slave: one who neglects his own affairs in favour of the affairs of others. Of course, we would say that it makes a difference whether this is done willingly or unwillingly. Still, from the viewpoint of the individual, there is a slavish aspect to political affairs. This is a counterintuitive conclusion, given that it seems more natural to think of politics in terms of mastery. This is certainly how Alcibiades thinks of it (at least when he is not with Socrates): he is interested in politics precisely because he would like to rule the

---

[324] There is a fourth way in which Socrates is like silens and satyrs: in respect of their peculiar wisdom. The silens and satyrs were said to possess wisdom which they would only reveal if captured. All that is known of their wisdom is that they said it was better for humans not to be born, or, if born, to die quickly. This is consistent with the wisdom Socrates has Diotima impart with regard to the beautiful. The beautiful makes life "prove to be a sorry sort of thing". Human flesh, colours, and other "mortal foolishness", i.e., life, is like a sickness (211e-a). Cf. Nietzsche *Birth of Tragedy* sec 3, par. 3.

Athenians, and all the Greeks, and indeed all humanity if possible (*Alcibiades I* 105a-c; *Alcibiades II* 141a-b). But in ruling others, one becomes in some sense bound by them, an insight that calls to mind the Hegelian Master/Slave dialectic. There is a slavish aspect to all rule, even and especially to the rule of those whose stance towards the people they rule is exploitive (*Republic*, 579c-e). If the ruler were self-ruled, he would not become entangled in this sort of slavishness; if the ruler were self-ruled, he would not be a ruler in the usual sense of the term (one who rules others). He becomes bound up in the affairs of others because he is not self-sufficient, not complete and whole in and of himself. We can understand the difference between Socrates and Alcibiades in these very terms: the self-ruled Socrates abstains from politics and will not rule others, whereas Alcibiades, who is not in complete control of himself, lusts after power over others.

Because Alcibiades can see the truth of this, because he is not able to contradict the arguments of the self-ruled Socrates, he stops up his ears and takes flight, as a slave might run from a master (216a-b). But the irony is that he is not running from his master, he is running from Socrates, the one who would free him (contrary to what he says he thinks, cf. 219e), and straight into the arms of what is in a very real sense his master: the people (*demos*). It is his erotic nature that causes him to do this. He is drawn to the people, he longs to be loved by them, and to receive their honours (216b). This of course makes him a beloved rather than a lover – another counterintuitive conclusion, inasmuch as he is driven by eros for power and glory, which would seem to make him a lover. But the substance of this power and glory is inseparable from men's recognition of him as their sovereign. There is a Lover/Beloved dialectic which runs parallel to the Master/Slave dialectic, but which is actually a deeper phenomenon. The Lover/Beloved dialectic is at play in his account of the education he receives from Socrates (which I will discuss below), an education in the beautiful that is simultaneously designed to transform Alcibiades from a beloved into a lover.

In the end, his longing for power and glory is stronger than the longing for true beauty – the nobility of genuine virtue – access to which is gained through the Socratic education. Because Alcibiades succumbs to pleasures he knows are lower than those he could enjoy, he cannot fully enjoy them. He cannot quite shake the troublesome thought that he is making a serious mistake, and it gnaws at him. He ends up conflicted, a divided man who is drawn in two opposed directions at the same time, never fully at peace, a condition that is symptomatic of one who is not self-ruled. His eros leads him to forgo the higher for the sake of the lower, it leads him into a slavish condition even though he could be free. He recognizes that there is something shameful about this, and so he feels ashamed of himself. He says he feels shame before Socrates alone, but that is not quite right. He feels shame before the speeches of Socrates, which reveal to him the truth of his shameful condition. The sight of Socrates merely makes the memory of these speeches more vivid and painful. This is why he runs from Socrates, but it is futile to do so: Socrates is in his head, and he cannot run from himself. He says: "many is the time that I should see with pleasure that he is not among human beings; but again, if this should happen, I know well that I should be much more greatly distressed." This contradictory feeling he has before Socrates is merely a manifestation of a deeper contradiction within his soul (216a-c).

Alcibiades now further develops the likeness of Socrates to silens and satyrs. Like them, he appears erotically inclined towards 'beauties', and to be ignorant. I have argued above that these appearances are really two dimensions of his irony.[325] He faces the world with irony. His irony is his silenic guise. And what is on the inside? Alcibiades first finds moderation. He says that Socrates, contrary to appearances, actually cares nothing if someone is physically beautiful, nor does he care for any of the things deemed blessings by the multitude. After moderation, Alcibiades sees something else hidden deeper within Socrates: beautiful images. As Alcibiades describes it here, then, there are two parts to Socrates' 'exterior', or his silenic guise of irony (his eros for 'beauties' and his ignorance), and two parts to his 'interior' (his moderation and his beautiful images, 216d-e). It is interesting to consider in more detail how the two parts of his exterior relate to the two parts of his interior. The crafted silens, to which he is likened, have an ugly exterior that hides a beautiful interior. Alcibiades takes advantage of Socrates homely looks to establish his analogy, but analysis of it is more complicated. For there is nothing even apparently ugly about attraction to beauties per se. What *is* apparently ugly is his ignorance; the irony of his ignorance is thus actually exterior to the irony of his attraction to beauties. He has, then, layers of exterior. And since the beautiful images of Socrates are, according to Alcibiades, hidden deeper within his interior than is his moderation, he also has layers of interior. He has layers of exterior and layers of interior, or rather ever deeper layers (much like an onion). Alcibiades expressly contrasts his eros for beauties with his moderation; his eros for beauties hides his moderation. This seems to imply that his ignorance hides his beautiful images, which is indeed what Alcibiades' seems to say. Later, after he has spoken of his attempted seduction of Socrates and the courage of Socrates, he speaks of the speeches of Socrates as like the crafted silens: an ugly exterior hiding a beautiful interior. His speeches appear to be at first laughable, i.e., ugly. Socrates speaks of pack-asses, blacksmiths, shoemakers, and tanners, the sort of things he typically speaks of when he appears to be ignorant. But if one opens up these speeches and gets inside them, one sees that "they are the most divine and have the largest number of images of virtue within them; and that they apply to the largest area, indeed to the whole area that is proper to examine for one who is going to be beautiful and good" (221e-a). So his ignorance hides his beautiful images, while his eros for beauties hides his moderation; the outermost thing that Alcibiades sees hides the innermost thing he sees. The deepest truth is hidden by the most apparent, outermost thing; the deepest truth is, then, in some sense close to the surface. This is a reflection of the importance that Plato generally accords to the surface, or to the apparent, in his dialogues.

---

[325] See pp. 231-233 above.

Alcibiades thinks that the images of beauty hidden within Socrates are of surpassing beauty: "I once saw them, and it was my opinion that they were so divine, golden, altogether beautiful, and amazing that one had to do just about whatever Socrates commanded" (216e-a). The way that he describes them calls to mind Diotima's description of the beautiful, which is also (supposedly) of surpassing beauty. The beauty that he sees within Socrates is his (imperfect) view of the beautiful as described by Diotima (which is still more deeply hidden). Alcibiades' account of his private relationship with Socrates really exemplifies her description of the private education in the beautiful, or the ascent to the beautiful, as seen through the eyes of a student. The ascent begins, recall, with beautiful bodies. The first step is to love the embodied soul and there to generate beautiful speeches, which is what Socrates did with Alcibiades.

Alcibiades is beautiful, and he experiences Socrates' attraction to his beauty, but he is of course unaware that this attraction could be merely a step in a larger educative process. It is these beautiful speeches, made by Socrates when he was earnest and opened, which produced the beautiful images of which Alcibiades became aware, and which had such a profound effect on him. The second step is to move from one beautiful body to more beautiful bodies, and to all beautiful bodies. This is what makes Socrates appear to be erotically attracted to 'beauties'. And, of course, in a sense he really is, but the point that Alcibiades misses is that this attraction is born of an erotic attraction to the beauty in everything. The inevitable consequence of this larger attraction is that Socrates must slacken his eros for particular beautiful bodies, for in understanding that any given body is beautiful only because it briefly participates in a larger beauty, he must come to regard that particular beauty as petty. This is what Alcibiades experiences as Socrates' moderation, which he claims to have found insulting. But it is not really moderation; Socrates only appears to be moderate because he is more powerfully attracted to something else.[326] With respect to that thing, he is actually most immoderate. The moderation that Alcibiades finds within Socrates thus turns out to be another silenic guise, yet another mask that hides a still deeper interior. Alcibiades gets an intimation of this deeper interior through the beautiful images that he once saw. Socrates' revelation of these beautiful images really amounts to an invitation to join him in an ascent to a higher beauty. It is because Alcibiades could not consistently act upon this invitation that the Socratic education of Alcibiades failed in mid-stream, and was aborted before it reached its natural end.

One wonders how Alcibiades would have reacted had he been present for Socrates' eulogy to Eros, and received a kind of explanation of what he meant to Socrates. Perhaps it would have muted the shamelessness of his own speech.

---

[326] In *Republic*, Socrates says that the lover of wisdom is a lover of learning and one who would be "concerned with the pleasure of the soul itself with respect to itself and would forsake those pleasures that come through the body" (*Republic* 485d). It is precisely because the philosopher loves wisdom and is ruled by this love that he is relatively uninterested in the things that most people desire, hence has remarkable self-control in the presence of them, and hence appears to be moderate. This is the moderation that Alcibiades sees. But it is only an apparent moderation. With respect to what he actually cares most about, Socrates is most immoderate.

Alcibiades now embarks on a shameless account of the intimate details of their love affair, thus demonstrating an aspect of his character to which he himself alludes: that he is generally shameless (216b). The details with which he is about to go public are really quite embarrassing, but there is no indication that this bothers him in the slightest. Nor is there any indication that it bothers Socrates. Perhaps there is something in the Socratic education that actually promotes or cultivates shamelessness. Alcibiades sees philosophy as a frenzied, bacchic sort of endeavour (218a-b), a viewpoint that is supported by Socrates in the third speech in *Phaedrus* (244a-257b). Perhaps an adequate eulogy to Socrates could only be given by a shameless man.

However that may be, the account he is about to give is in large part shameless because it is an account of intimate or private matters given in a (semi-) public forum. This reminds us of the tension between the public and the private, which first emerged in the speech of Phaedrus. The relative extent of the public and the private is itself a matter of political or public control, but a city wherein nothing was private would be horrible, as Plato's *Republic* actually shows. This is what accounts for the sense of unease one feels in hearing private affairs publicly exposed. Yet the city might benefit from the exposure of some private affairs. What Alcibiades exposes to us are the erotic details surrounding the private education he receives from Socrates. If these details are essential to understanding the character of that education, then we benefit from hearing them.

The details pertain to what he did in an effort to seduce Socrates. He lists them in an order of escalating shamelessness. They are: he arranges to be alone with Socrates, he engages Socrates in naked wrestling, he invites Socrates to dinner, he invites Socrates to dinner and compels him to stay late, he makes an unambiguous offer of gratification, and he makes a simply physical advance (217a-219c). These things are six in number. As I observed above, Diotima's philosophic education in the beautiful included six ascending steps. In my opinion, the six steps of escalating shamelessness which Alcibiades takes in an effort to seduce Socrates are meant to be seen as mirroring Diotima's six steps towards the beautiful: her steps constitute an ascent towards the beautiful, his steps constitute a descent away from the beautiful (and supposedly towards the many).

Socrates is trying to make a lover out of Alcibiades, but he is trying to make him love what he loves: the beautiful. Trying to cultivate eros for the beautiful is precisely what the teacher does in Diotima's private philosophic education. Socrates' spurns the advances of his student Alcibiades because, if he did not, then the education in the beautiful through which he is trying to lead Alcibiades would collapse instantly. The teacher cannot credibly maintain the supremacy of psychical beauty while simultaneously slaking his desires with physical beauties. The private education makes very difficult demands on the teacher, who has to engage the student in an intimate relationship while still maintaining control of it, and first of all over himself. We can imagine how Pausanius would have responded to Alcibiades' advances, and so we can readily see why Pausanius would not be a very good teacher. Pausanius articulated an ideal of education that he would, in the event, totally disregard, whereas Socrates, who said nothing of that ideal, does, in the event, abide by it. Socrates 'walks the walk' without 'talking the talk'. He is a good teacher because he is first and foremost a maniacal lover of wisdom, which Diotima presents as being of surpassing beauty (204b). As Socrates ironically demonstrates to Alcibiades, the beauty of bodies is worth little in comparison, which is why he is unmoved by it (218d-a). Both Pausanius and Alcibiades lack his simplicity and unity of soul, and consequently they are inadequate as teacher and student. Alcibiades, an inadequate student, received an abortive education from a fully adequate teacher. This left him in a kind of 'in between' state – between philosophy and politics. His career in politics is a consequence of this. The 'in between' state of Alcibiades is reflected in his status as lover. He has been transformed from a beloved into a lover of Socrates, a transformation that inclines him towards becoming a lover of the beautiful, but he is not consistent. He can never quite stop being a beloved: the longing to be loved by the many is always with him (216b).

After Alcibiades completes the tale of his failed seduction of Socrates, he says: "I believed I had been dishonoured, and yet I still admired his nature, moderation, and courage" (219d). Oddly, he does not claim to admire the wise man for his wisdom. In fact, in all of his praises of Socrates, he never once praises him for the virtue of wisdom. And this even though we know he learned from Socrates that wisdom is indeed the highest and most god-like virtue of all (*Alcibiades I* 133b-c). He rather seems here to accord that status to the virtue of courage, as he did before his Socratic education began (*Alcibiades I* 115c-e). In this he is like Phaedrus, the dialogue's representative of the original city. As I argued in my discussion of that speech, courage is for the political man a higher virtue than wisdom, and Alcibiades speaks here as a political man.[327] He praises Socrates for his courage or manliness,[328] or for what the city regards as most praiseworthy. He emphasizes his political excellence over his philosophical excellence. The venue where the virtue of courage shines forth most brilliantly is on the battlefield. Hence, his praise of Socrates now shifts to tales of things he did while on two military campaigns: Potidaea and Delium.

Alcibiades' praise of Socrates contains two prominent stories – the story of his failed seduction of Socrates that we have just examined, and the story of Socrates on military campaign – which seem to be largely unrelated, but there is this connection between the two: the apparent moderation of Socrates that has been on display throughout the story of the failed seduction is essential to the virtue that Socrates shows on military campaign. Alcibiades discusses a total of six admirable things Socrates did on campaign that present an insight into the nature of his virtue (219e-221c), which clearly differs from that of Achilles, the warrior-hero that Socrates is meant to replace (cf. *Apology* 28b-d). Alcibiades' speech provides a kind of political education in courage. Alcibiades praises Socrates for his moderation and courage in the same breath, thus closely linking the two virtues; Socrates' example taken to heart could only have a moderating effect on courageous men. Of the six things that Alcibiades mentions, the first things seem to be more specifically moderate, and as he continues they become more overtly and obviously courageous. This pattern within the six things suggests a basis for courage in moderation, or that one who is without moderation will not be capable of genuine courage.

The first thing he mentions is that he shared mess with Socrates on campaign in Potidaea, and that consequently he was able to observe how self-controlled Socrates was when the army was cut off and the men were compelled to go without food (219e-a). Food and water are the most basic requirements of mere life. The stomach is man's constant reminder that he is an animal. When the needs of our animal natures are not being satisfied, it tends to throw our lives into disarray. The lack of food and water is demoralizing, and tends to break the spirit. Soldiers who are preoccupied with hunger and thirst cannot concentrate on anything else, which makes it difficult to fight and obey orders, or generally to do the courageous work that is expected of soldiers. Thus it is said, 'an army travels on its stomach'. One who is able to forget, or at rather suppress, the needs of his stomach is thus far more likely to be courageous and a good soldier.

---

[327] This has something to do with the fact that the beauty or nobility of courage is more readily apparent. See p. 50 above.

[328] Courage is *the* manly virtue, and virtually synonymous with it, a fact which is captured linguistically in the Greek language by the close etymological relationship between the word for 'courage' (*andreía*) and 'man' (*anër*; *andrós* in the genitive).

Second, at festivities, Socrates alone is able to take pleasure in other things (220a). The relevance of this point is at first difficult to understand. What does courage have to do with the enjoyment of pleasure? We typically think of people as being courageous in the face of pain, not pleasure. The connection between pleasure and moderation is more apparent. The ability to enjoy the various pleasures actually requires moderation. No one really enjoys anything that masters him. The alcoholic does not really enjoy alcohol.[329] The mastery over the pleasures that seems inseparable from the idea of moderation is also necessary for courage, for anyone who is incapable of mastering the pleasures is incapable of self-mastery, which is what courage seems to require (cf. *Republic* 442a-c, 486a-b). This is why one who is truly courageous is courageous in the face of *both* pains and pleasures, and must cultivate courage by inuring himself to both through a kind of psychic gymnastic (*Republic* 442c, *Laches* 191d-b, *Laws* 633c-b with 647c-d).

Alcibiades notes in this connection that no one has ever seen Socrates drunk. He does not mean by this that he is a paragon of abstinence, for he makes it clear that he actually enjoys drink. He means rather that he is a 'good drinker', one who can 'hold his liquor'. He earlier referred to the fact that no matter how much Socrates drinks, he never gets drunk (214a). This statement is no Dionysian excess on the part of Alcibiades, for the former ruler of the assembly, the moderate Dr. Eryximachus, observed precisely the same thing of Socrates. This is bizarre. How could anyone be literally unaffected by drink? The question deserves careful consideration, for drink is a prominent issue in this dialogue. The specific issue of Socrates' remarkable capacity for drink comes up a total of three times (176c, 214a, and 220a). And after all, 'symposium' literally *means* a 'drinking together'. Drink is an especially prominent issue in *this* symposium in that an express decision is taken to drink moderately, each at his own pace, and subsequently – at Alcibiades' instigation – that decision is overturned, and everyone eventually is compelled to drink excessively. So how are we to understand Socrates' ability to drink without getting drunk, and what is the significance of this in the context of *Symposium*?

---

[329] For an apparently light-hearted development of this idea in the context of the food, drink, and especially sex, see Xenophon *Memorabilia* I(iii).

The issue of the harm and benefit of drink, especially social drink, is, curiously, the major theme in the first two books of Plato's *Laws*. There, an old Athenian stranger defends the Athenian practice of symposia (at least when they are properly conducted) in his dialogue with two other old men, a Cretan and a Lacedaimonian. He makes some fairly commonplace observations about the effects of drink. One who drinks tends to become "sanguine, bold, and more shameless than he should be", and, generally, "everyone becomes lighter than he really is, rejoices, becomes filled with license of speech, and fails to listen to his neighbours; each considers himself to be capable of ruling himself as well as the others" (671b-c). Drink is a material thing that somehow has an effect on the immaterial soul. It creates an experience that is akin to everything which drives one out of one's wits with the intoxication of pleasure. It can therefore be used for testing the soul in the face of pleasures and for the kind of psychic gymnastic spoken of above (649d). But it is possible that someone could have a perfectly balanced soul, a soul that could not be upset by the intoxication of pleasure:

> On the other hand, a man would act just as correctly if, trusting in himself on account of the fine preparation given him by nature and by training, he did not hesitate to perform such gymnastic exercise in the company of many fellow drinkers, making a display of his capacity to outstrip and overcome the power of the necessary transformation effected by the drink. Thus would he show that because of his virtue, he was not made to fall into a single major disgraceful act nor to act like a different person, but that he could go away before taking that last drink, because he was afraid of the weakness all human beings have in the face of drink[330] (648d-e)

---

[330] The drink that the Athenian stranger is talking about here is actually an imaginary 'fear drug', which is the 'opposite' of wine. But since the argument is that both it and wine could be used for the purpose of testing and psychic gymnastic, this could as well be said about wine.

The fact that Socrates never becomes drunk can be taken as evidence of his supreme virtue – of how thoroughly well-ordered his soul is.

Because of this, he is the best suited to rule drinkers. Alcibiades establishes himself as the leader of the drinking and compels everyone to drink (213e-a). But if he is given to excesses of pleasure, or if he is not able to remain sober in drink, then he will be a poor leader of the symposium. In the words of the Athenian stranger of Plato's *Laws*:

> So shouldn't a sober and wise ruler be set over the drunkards, and not the opposite? For if the ruler of drunken men were a young drunk who wasn't wise, he'd need a lot of good fortune to avoid doing some great evil. (*Laws* 640d)

In order to forestall some great evil, if Socrates is in the midst of men set on drinking, he will join them, so as to rule them.[331] This explains another curious thing about his drinking: that he never drinks unless compelled to (220a). How is he compelled to drink? He is compelled to drink by the 'wages of the best', the penalty for not ruling. The best men enter on ruling "as a necessity and because they have no other better than or like themselves to whom to turn it over" (*Republic* 347a-d). A sober and wise man, such as Socrates, ruling over drunkards can actually derive benefit out of the drinking. For because "the souls of drinkers, like some iron, become fiery, softened and youthful, so that they can be easily led – as they were when they were young", they can be educated (*Laws* 671b). And one who is "prudent in regard to social intercourse" can guard present friendship and see to it that "the friendship will increase through the intercourse they will have" (*Laws* 640c-d). It seems that Socrates both educates and promotes friendship: he teaches Agathon and Aristophanes about the nature of poetry, and seems to draw them closer together. Alcibiades has become the *de jure* leader of the drinking, but Socrates proves to be the *de facto* leader. At the end of *Symposium* at daybreak, it is only Socrates, Agathon, and Aristophanes who remain awake and still drinking, and he outlasts them too (223c-d). It is never made clear what happened to Alcibiades, whether he was among those who left earlier, or remained and fell asleep (223c).

---

[331] We could say, more simply, that he joins them out of politeness, for not to 'join in' with men who are drinking can be considered rude and insulting. But his concern for politeness shows his political character. And these things are consistent: he could not rule them in drink if he alienated them by refusing to join in it.

The third thing Alcibiades mentions about Socrates on campaign is his remarkable resistance against the winter. The winters in Potidaea are terrible, and when it was at its worst, everyone kept indoors, or if they did go out, "they wrapped themselves up in an amazing number of garments and put on shoes and tied up their feet in felt and sheepskins". But Socrates went out dressed just as he always did, and barefoot as usual. The men looked askance at him, "as if he were despising them" (220a-b). Socrates' silenic guise, with which he hides himself, and with which he spares others the awareness of the greatness of his soul, is his irony. But the greatness of his soul is manifested also in the toughness of his body, which it rules, and is made evident in his supreme moderation. He can hide his superiority of soul to a certain extent with his irony, but there is nothing analogous to irony that he can use to hide his superiority of body. Anyone with eyes can see his body, and so it is necessarily on full and clear display as he goes about the business of soldiering. If he evidently bears lightly things that others bear only with the greatest difficulty, some will take this as 'showing off', meant to affront them.

The connection between Socrates' physical endurance and his psychical strength is brought to the fore with the fourth and central thing that Alcibiades speaks of. He tells how once Socrates became entranced in a thought, and stood stock still on the same spot pondering from dawn on. By around noon, people began to notice. Dinner and evening came around and he was still there, in the exact same spot, apparently locked in thought. By that time, it had become oddly fascinating. Some of the men took out their bedding so they could lie beside him and see if he would remain there through the night (it was then summer). He did so, and finally when it was dawn and the sun came up, he made a prayer to it and departed (220c-d). There are two especially important things to notice about this episode. First of all, the central activity of his life, thought, is presented as taking place in the midst of war. He stands stock still pursuing a thought for a whole day and night, which evidently requires great strength, both physical and psychical. When we think of intellects at work, an image of rather soft people naturally comes to mind, perhaps reclining in a comfortable armchair by a cosy fire, reading a book or scratching out some notes. But Socrates is as far from this as one could possibly imagine. Such soft intellects could not possibly do what Socrates does. Secondly, he makes himself interesting and attractive, which has the effect of making what he does seem interesting and attractive. This is a remarkable accomplishment. Apart from courage, the virtuous man being virtuous does not generally make for very good theatre. And what could be more boring that watching a man engaged in the solitary activity of thought – 'lost in thought'. But Socrates the thinker makes himself interesting to people, and in this way, he makes them wonder about what he does. Alcibiades tells us that "in amazement [or 'wonder'; *thaumázontes*] one said to the other that Socrates had stood there in reflection since dawn" (220c). Aristotle finds the psychic origin of philosophy in the sense of wonder or amazement.[332] People are amazed with Socrates. They wonder what he could possibly be thinking about that was so fascinating that it could actually engage a person for a whole day and night. If this is not exactly an enticement to philosophise, it does have the effect of creating a sense of awe for such a strange person as could philosophise.

The fifth thing Alcibiades mentions is that Socrates saved him and his armour, for which he was determined *not* to receive any honours (220d-e). This story seems to call for comparison with Phaedrus' account of the lover and beloved on the battlefield. On his account, eros implants love of honour in the face of beautiful things. A lover would be especially pained by the shame of deserting his post or throwing away his weapons, to say nothing of leaving behind his beloved (178c-a). It is for Phaedrus really a sense of honour and shame, which eros amplifies, that draws the lover to virtue. But this clearly does not explain the virtue of Socrates. In fact, it seems to be irrelevant. He saved his beloved without any concern for whatever honours might accrue from this action, and as it turns out, actually wants nothing to do with them. He does the courageous, and hence noble and beautiful thing, without any concern for its ordinary rewards, which fact only seems to make it all the more noble and beautiful. His virtue as Alcibiades presents it is then consistent with the highest virtue that the city recognizes, but it is higher.

Finally, Alcibiades speaks of Socrates and Laches in the retreat from Delium. He was able to observe this especially well, for he was on horseback, which is a position of relative safety. The retreat from Delium was not an orderly one, but rather a rout (221a-c). On another occasion, Socrates engages Laches in a dialogue about what courage is, in which Laches strongly praises him for his conduct in this retreat (*Laches* 181a-b). This is the sort of extremely dangerous situation, wherein one is constantly exposed to the threat of violent attack and death, steadfastness under which seems to be the most striking exemplification of the virtue of courage. Socrates seems to be not the least bothered by it, remaining totally calm and level-headed. Citing a line from Aristophanes' *Clouds* (362), Alcibiades says that Socrates walked the same pelican walk in retreat from Delium as he walked in the streets of Athens, for which he was apparently famous, and with the same attentive posture. His basic demeanour remains the same no matter where he is, or under what circumstances. He is as constant as a man can be, presumably because he is as free as a man can be from the external circumstances with which he is confronted, being perfectly self-mastered.

---

[332] See n. 103, p. 93 above.

Once one considers all the praiseworthy things about Socrates, all of his surpassing virtue taken as a whole, he seems, like the woman Diotima he created, utterly fantastic and unbelievable. As Alcibiades says of him: "what deserves all wonder is that respect in which he is like no human being, neither the ancients nor those of the present day" (221c). This is strictly necessary because he is an altogether novel human type: the political philosopher. Socrates is literally unique. He is the first to philosophise about politics, or, as Cicero said, he is the man who brought philosophy down from the heavens and into the city. What Cicero presumably meant by this is that he was the first philosopher to apprehend both the first principles *and* the nature of the one who thinks about them, and to invite his fellow man to do likewise. The magnitude of this achievement is almost beyond comprehension and certainly strange. Hence Alcibiades' assessment of him is fitting: "But the sort that this human being in his strangeness proved to be, both in himself and in his speeches, one could not even come close to finding, whether one looked among the men of today, or among the ancients; unless, after all, one were to liken him in himself and in his speeches to those I say – to no human being, but to silens and satyrs" (221d).

---------- * ---------- * ----------

We have seen that there is a political story within *Symposium* that depicts the political problem and various possible solutions to it.[333] The political story shows that the heart of the political problem is the gods. It has offered three potential solutions to the political problem, two poetic and one philosophic. All of these are inadequate. The first solution involves the poetic rehabilitation of the gods. But this does not work because the existing gods are no longer believable due to the widespread awareness of the artificial or man-made character of the laws and of the gods that support them, and of the reality of physical nature that operates according to non-mythical non-theological principles. The second solution involves the poetic creation of novel gods. But this does not work because the novel god is even less believable than the existing god: novel gods are apt to be a more or less transparent reflection of the vanity of the poet that creates them. The third solution involves the philosophical rehabilitation of the gods. This involves finding a *natural* basis for the gods, which could thus be believed in even by people like Pausanius and Eryximachus. But this does not work either, because while philosophy is indeed able to find a natural basis for the gods – for gods are images of the true divinities, the forms (such as the form of the beautiful described by Diotima) – this natural basis is too far removed from actual political experience to be politically relevant. Seeing that none of these three solutions to the political problem are viable, I speculated that perhaps a fourth one, found in the character of Alcibiades might be. In my opinion, the dialogue provides a variety of evidence to support the conclusion that this is indeed the case, which I will now consider.

Any political solution, in order to be practically viable as a political solution (as opposed to viable in thought), must be *effective*. We have first to notice how effective Alcibiades is, to notice the consummate political skill that he displays, virtually from the very moment he appears. I have already commented on the spectacular quality of his appearance. What we know of the man from history, and the first thing that we learn of him from this dialogue, is that he is utterly spectacular. Here is a man who turns heads, who habitually impresses people with his presence. That sort of thing is a great political asset, *especially* in a democracy. We get an immediate demonstration of how he uses it. He has come, he claims, for the single purpose of wreathing the head of Agathon. Given that he wished to come but was not part of the original party, we can take it that he was uninvited. In effect, he uses his spectacular entrance brashly to 'crash' the party. He concludes his remarkable introduction with a peremptory demand:

---

[333] See pp. 279-282 above.

> Well, tell me on the spot, shall I enter on the said conditions or not? Will you join me in drink or not? (213c-a)

In response to this, *all* applaud loudly and ask him to enter. This scene captures the manner in which he dealt with the Athenian democracy: he would bring it about that the people cheered him and asked for him, even if he was actually imposing himself on them. He thus manages to enter on his own terms, and immediately upon entry changes the character of the symposium.

As soon as Alcibiades arrives, he subverts the order of *Symposium*, and takes control. Eryximachus, the original ruler of *Symposium*, established the rule of the evening with three laws: a) the men were to drink without compulsion, as much as they pleased (and were encouraged to drink little or nothing); b) there was to be no external entertainment (they dismissed the flute girl); and c) they were to entertain each other by each giving a speech in turn in praise of Eros (in the order established by their seating, starting on the left and working around right, 176c-177d). Upon entering the assembly accompanied by a flute girl, Alcibiades breaks the central law. As we have seen, he will soon break the third law, which provides the overarching structure of the evening. And with his first decree, he breaks the first law:

> All right, men. In my opinion, you're sober. This cannot be allowed; you must drink, for we have agreed to it. And I choose as the leader of the drinking - until you have drunk enough – myself. (213e)

Not surprisingly, Doctor Eryximachus resists the disintegration of his authority:

> What are we to do Alcibiades? Is this to be our way, to say nothing over our cups, nor sing anything, but simply to drink like the thirsty? (214a-b)

Alcibiades responds that he will obey whatever Eryximachus says, citing a line from Homer: "For a physician is worth the equivalent of many others" (*Iliad*, 11.514). He is graceful in the face of resistance from the *anciènne régime*, and he can afford to be, for he has already won over the crowd. The line from Homer refers specifically to the fact that a physician is worth a lot in times of battle because he can heal the wounded. This could be interpreted to mean that Alcibiades needs the doctor because he will be going into battle. And, as the new leader, he will presumably be imposing this battle on everyone. In any event, the grace with which he handles the former ruler makes an ally out of him: Eryximachus condones his praising Socrates rather than eros, as the original *nomos* of *Symposium* required (214d).

Here is a man who can take control of the city, and make it do whatever he wishes. Alcibiades is *the* political man. And, I would submit, the essential thing that underwrites his political potency is his god-like aspect. That Plato means to draw our attention to this aspect of his character is evident from the following. Alcibiades has come, he says, with fillets on his head, "in order that from [his] head [he] might wreath the head of the wisest and the most beautiful" (212e). When he enters he wreaths the head of Agathon (213e). He thus appears to judge Agathon the wisest and the most beautiful. But as our narrator tells the story, when he sees Socrates, he takes some fillets from the head of Agathon and wreaths the head of Socrates with them (213e). He thus judges between Agathon and Socrates, and judges Socrates the wiser. Earlier in the dialogue, Agathon said in jest to Socrates: "A little later on you and I will go to court about our wisdom, with Dionysus as our judge" (175e). Alcibiades appears looking very much like Dionysus, and, in fact, he does end up judging between them. Plato seems to suggest that the gods are poetic creations modelled after people like Alcibiades. Alcibiades *is* Dionysus.

Alcibiades as god answers to the difficulties with the previous three political solutions found in *Symposium*, solutions that were all centred on the gods. First, whereas the existing gods have become unbelievable, Alcibiades is not: one has only to behold him in order to believe that he is real. Second, whereas Alcibiades is a novel god, he does not suffer from the likely weaknesses of poetically created novel gods: he is not a more or less transparent reflection of a vain man, but rather is himself manifestly great. And third, because he is a living man, he offers a natural basis for the gods which is *not* too far removed from actual political experience to be politically relevant, and which could thus be believed in even by people like Pausanius and Eryximachus.

This last point requires further elaboration. The third potential political solution failed because, although Socrates is indeed able to provide an account of a simply natural basis for the gods – the true divinities, or the forms (such as the form of the beautiful) – he did not explain how these are politically relevant, and indeed we saw that there is reason to suspect that the awareness of the forms may even be politically harmful, or at least dangerous. If the forms are to serve as the natural basis for the gods in a politically effective way, something has to happen that would allow this to occur. This 'something' is the failed Socratic education of Alcibiades. Alcibiades was exposed to images of the forms through his Socratic education. Socrates is evidently able to mediate between forms and humans. If we think of the forms as the true gods, he is thus truly daimonic according to the description of the daimonic given by Diotima (202e-a). But Alcibiades is in a sense also daimonic. For his exposure to Socrates' images of the forms, his Socratic education, obviously had an effect on his politics, which means that he too mediates between the forms and humans, if only in a refracted way. More precisely, Alcibiades is daimonic in the sense that he mediates between Socratic images of forms and humans. Because Socrates makes these images, Alcibiades mediates between Socrates and humans. Socrates' ability to make compelling images of the forms suggests that he is somehow form-like.[334] Socrates is the living representation of the forms. In the political solution, form is to god what Socrates is to Alcibiades, and the living god Alcibiades is daimonic. He has seen an intimation of the true beauty of the forms, and yet he remains essentially tied to politics. He is thus able to mediate between the forms and the city in a manner in which Socrates could not. The daimonic power of Socrates is dangerous in that it has the tendency to dissolve the boundaries of the city, and therewith the city itself.[335] This is why Alcibiades and not Socrates is the god. Socrates mediates between the forms and a few humans; Alcibiades mediates between the forms (via Socratic images of them) and humans generally.

---

[334] A suggestion which seems to be ratified by the presentation of the philosopher found in *Republic*:

> Soc: For presumably, Adeimantus, a man who has his understanding truly turned towards the things that *are* has no leisure to look down toward the affairs of human beings and to be filled with envy and ill will as a result of fighting with them. But rather, because he sees and contemplates things that are set in a regular arrangement and are always in the same condition – things that neither do injustice to one another, nor suffer it at one another's hands, but remain all in order according to reason – he imitates them and, as much as possible, makes himself like them. Or do you suppose there's any way of keeping someone from imitating that which he admires and therefore keeps company with?
>
> Ad: It's not possible.
>
> Soc: Then it's the philosopher, keeping company with the divine and orderly who becomes orderly and divine; to the extent that is possible for a human being. (500b-d)

The god Alcibiades is the solution to the political problem. This is the great political insight of Plato's *Symposium*.[336] And while this insight might not initially seem to be of much practical value, if we consider the manner in which he is presented, we see that it attaches some substance to the insight that is indeed of practical value. This consideration provides important practical political teachings. I will now comment upon five of these.

First, most obviously and perhaps most importantly, Alcibiades is a man – that is to say, one single man. The solution to the political problem lies in a single man. It does not lie in a committee or a coalition of men, much less in a wide plurality of men. Moreover, the man comes in from outside: he is in some sense an outsider. For this reason, he is not bound to certain parts of the city, but only, if at all, to the city as a whole. This accords him maximal freedom to move around in the city at will, and to remain above the factional strife of the city. Second, the solution to the political problem lies in democracy. The assembly that Alcibiades bursts in on is a democratic assembly. In ruling it, he becomes the 'first among equals'; he rules imperiously, even though he rules a democracy. There is no necessary inconsistency between the observations that the political solution lies in a man and in democracy. Thucydides, speaking of Alcibiades' guardian Pericles, made this point abundantly clear:

> Pericles indeed, by his rank, ability, and known integrity, was enabled to exercise an independent control over the multitude – in short to lead them instead of being led by them; for as he never sought power by improper means, he was never compelled to flatter them, but, on the contrary, enjoyed so high an estimation that he could afford to anger them by contradiction. Whenever he saw them unseasonably and insolently elated, he would with a word reduce them to alarm; on the other hand, if they fell victims to a panic, he could at once restore them to confidence. In short, what was nominally a democracy became in his hands government by the first citizen. (*Peloponnesian War*, I(65))

---

[335] See pp. 250- 251 above.

[336] This claim may call to mind the modern doctrine of *Caesarism*. But whereas I suspect that Caesar himself understood the point I am making here, the difference between it and the modern doctrine is that in the latter there is no sense of the crucial connection to philosophy. I will expand on the nature of this connection below.

Democracy gives the people a sense of ownership of the regime, and hence a sense of a stake in it, whereas the effective rule of the 'first citizen' ensures that the rule is not whimsical or capricious as long as the 'first citizen' is not a tyrant. And because he rules a democracy, it is hard to rule tyrannically.[337] For strictly speaking, 'democracy' does not mean rule of the people, but rather that the people are strong, and as long as the people are strong, it is hard for tyranny to emerge. This was one of Pausanius' points in his discussion the parts of Ionia where they live under tyrannies: the lack of manliness on the part of the subjects engenders tyranny (182b-d). As Thucydides explains it, the true basis of Pericles' power was his surpassing virtue, or the fact that he stood head and shoulders above all other Athenians. The god-like aspect of the ruler supports this perception.

Third, the political solution involves a rather complicated relation between politics and poetry. There is a natural tension between the politician and the poet, inasmuch as both are somehow dependent on the people. One must note in this connection that the only characters of *Symposium* who are said to have achieved universal applause (which is the praise of the many for the one) are Agathon and Alcibiades (198a and 213a). Because both require the praise or endorsement of the people, they are in some sense competitors. The accolades for one seem to come at the expense of accolades for the other. Alcibiades, like Socrates, stayed away from the celebration of Agathon's victory the night before (174a and 212e). Alcibiades, like Socrates, declines to compete with Agathon on his own stage. The tension between the politicians and the tragedians is captured wonderfully by the Athenian Stranger of Plato's *Laws*, when he answers the question he has posed on behalf of the tragedians as to whether they will gain admittance to the city:

---

[337] This seems to be counter to the genesis of tyranny as described in *Republic* (562a-569c). But there, tyranny clearly emerges from what might be described as 'extreme' democracy, i.e., a democracy where there the principle of the regime, or what it defines as good – freedom – is pursued to excess. Too much freedom upsets all order in the city, and makes the souls of the citizens soft and dissolute. This makes them weak and hence ripe for slavery. As Socrates says: "Too much freedom seems to change into nothing but too much slavery, both for private man and city" (564a). Because tyranny emerges out of a regime of *extreme* freedom, and because extreme freedom engenders weakness rather than strength, that regime cannot be a democracy in the true sense: a regime where the people are strong.

> 'Best of strangers', we should say, 'we ourselves are poets, who have to the best of our ability created a tragedy that is the most beautiful and the best; at any rate, our whole political regime is constructed as the imitation of the most beautiful and best way of life, which we at least assert to be really the truest tragedy. Now you are poets, and we too are poets of the same things; we are your rivals as artists and performers of the most beautiful drama, which true law alone by nature can bring to perfection – as we hope. So don't suppose that we'll ever easily, at any rate, allow you to come among us, set up your stage in the market place, and introduce actors whose beautiful voices speak louder than ours. Don't suppose that we'll easily let you make public speeches to the children and the women and the whole mob, speaking of the same pursuits that we speak of, but saying things that are in great part the most opposite to what we say. For we'd be almost completely mad – we and every city, if it allowed you to do what's just been described, before its rulers had passed a judgment on whether or not the words and practices you had created were to be spoken in its midst or not'. (*Laws* 817b-d).

But the rulers of the city in fact have a hard time passing judgment on the poets, and then following through on it in an effective way. There is no reason to think that Alcibiades would have any easier a time of censoring Agathon than Eryximachus would have of censoring Aristophanes.[338] The consummate politician must recognize this difficulty; he must recognize the inevitable practical power of the poet. This recognition brings about the realization that he must go to great trouble to win him over, to make him love him. For while this or that tragedian can perhaps be killed, poetry per se cannot be eliminated, as it is simply coeval with politics. Some tragedian will inevitably work, and his work appeals to most people (*Laws* 658d). It is better that Agathon create poetry that has Alcibiades, whose shield bore the emblem of Eros with a thunderbolt,[339] as the novel god Eros, than an Eros constructed entirely out of his imagination. Because the tragedian can support the god-like aspect of the ruler (and hence also detract from it, cf. *Republic* 568b), he must be brought close to the ruler. This is captured here dramatically by the fact that Alcibiades avowedly came to pay tribute to Agathon, and to woo him (212e-c and 222b-a). Alcibiades, the successful politician, claims to come for the successful poet Agathon.

Fourth, the political solution comes to be through what can be thought of as a eulogy to philosophy that is contrary to the established conventions of the city. The fact that Alcibiades claims that he came to woo Agathon, does not necessarily mean that this was indeed his main purpose in coming: there are times when the politician's purpose is other than he claims. It is much more likely that Alcibiades' main purpose in coming to the symposium was rather to praise Socrates: the most massive single fact about Alcibiades in this dialogue is that he eulogizes Socrates, in contravention of the *nomos* of *Symposium*. The political solution requires politicians that admire the beauty of philosophy, who are not thereby philosophical politicians. The relationship between politics and philosophy in the healthy city is at least as complicated as the relationship between politics and poetry. It is captured dramatically by the relationship between Alcibiades and Socrates. Alcibiades is attracted to the beauty that he sees within Socrates (215b and 221e-a), and finds his arguments utterly compelling, but yet he still does not simply listen to and obey Socrates (216a-c). He is open to philosophy, and is thus in a sense guided by it (more than are most gentlemen), even though he is not himself philosophical, as he remains essentially and incorrigibly political.[340] Alcibiades as ruler is not simply ruled by Socrates: the political solution does not lie in the rule of wisdom.

---

[338] See pp. 154-156

[339] See Plutarch *Greek Lives* "Alcibiades" 16.

Because the political solution does not lie in the rule of wisdom, there must be an element of unwisdom in political rule. There is thus a necessary tension between politics and philosophy. This is captured dramatically by the rivalry between Alcibiades and Socrates for the tragic poet Agathon (213c-d and 222c-a). Alcibiades is characterized as being engaged in battle with Socrates for Agathon. He jumps up when he sees Socrates, who he says is lying "in ambush". Like a wily warrior, Socrates appears suddenly, where he is least expected (213b-c). Socrates seeks the aid of the beloved in this battle, by suggesting to him that Alcibiades poses a common danger:

---

[340] This limitation can be captured in Diotima's erotic language as follows. The mother of Eros is Penia, who, notwithstanding her unattractiveness and poverty, finds a way to snare her man, Poros. By contrast, the beautiful and wealthy Alcibiades is, at least as he tells the story here, unable to snare his man. He is, in this crucial respect"without resource" (219d-e). If we examine Diotima's genealogy of Eros, we find that Alcibiades is in accord with the nature of the father, and not that of the mother: Alcibiades is 'all man'. Socrates is, however, androgynous (contrary to what Alcibiades' eulogy to him suggests). He clearly has the nature of both the father and the mother. His androgyny is suggested dramatically by the fact that he creates the speech of the woman Diotima, thus making his eulogy to eros a "man/woman" speech. Philosophy requires sexual transcendance. The difference between Alcibiades and Socrates can be expressed as follows: whereas Alcibiades is meant to be understood as the highest man, Socrates is meant to be understood as the highest human.

> Take care lest he do something now, and do reconcile us; or if he tries to use force, defend me, since I really quake with fear at his madness and love of lovers.[341] (213d)

This is a smart stratagem, for if Socrates can win the allegiance of the object of the battle, then he would seem to have won before it even begins. And indeed Socrates does win in the end. There is a political problem here, inasmuch as the politician needs the poet in order to rule effectively. The attraction of poetry to philosophy would seem to work against successful politics, unless philosophy uses this attraction in support of politics.

Fifth, the ruler should appear to be drunk, even though he is not. Our narrator's first mention of Alcibiades speaks of his drunkenness: "Not much later they heard the voice of Alcibiades in the courtyard, very drunk and shouting loudly" (212d). And according to him, the first thing he says is: "Men hail! Will you welcome a man who's terribly drunk as a fellow drinker" (212e)? His drunkenness is integral to his appearance. Yet this fact does not comport well with the fact that there is a certain undeniable sense to everything that he says. Socrates, who – as the philosopher – is of course adept at perceiving the reality behind the appearance, having heard him speak, doubts that he is drunk:

> You are sober, in my opinion, Alcibiades, for otherwise you would never have so elegantly cast a screen about yourself and tried to conceal why you said all this; for you spoke as though it were a side-issue by inserting it at the end, as though you had not said everything for its sake – to set Agathon and me at odds, believing that I must love you and no one else, and that Agathon must be loved by you and by no one else. But you did not get away with it; this satyr and silenic drama of yours was quite obvious. (222c-d)

If we reread his speech on the assumption that he is in fact sober, it changes its complexion. Instead of the drunken ramblings of a jilted lover, it becomes a purposeful endeavour.[342] His drunken aspect supports his purpose. That the ruler should appear drunken is consistent with idea of the symposium as a metaphor for the city: the men of the city are drunk with hopes and fears, pleasures and pains.[343] In appearing drunk, the ruler personifies the citizenry. He thus appears inspired, which is fully consistent with his god-like aspect, *especially* with his Dionysian aspect; inspired people tend to have a wild and somewhat dangerous character. Sobriety in the guise of drunkenness gives the ruler tactical advantages. Most obviously, it gives him some latitude of speech and action: Alcibiades can 'get away' with saying and doing things that others could not. But more importantly, it puts the people around him on edge, and thus in a state of mental preparedness. There is no predicting what Alcibiades will do next, and so they have to be ready for anything. This forces them out of their established patterns of behaviour, thus making them more malleable, and hence more easily led.

---

[341] The irony of the soft effeminate Agathon defending Socrates from the hard masculine Alcibiades is quite amusing.

[342] We need not suppose that that purpose is what Socrates says it is: to woo Agathon away from him, although this may indeed be consistent with his larger purpose, i.e., paraising Socrates. When Alcibiades finishes speaking, our narrator tells us "there was laughter at his outspokenness because it was thought that he was still erotically inclined

---------- * ---------- * ----------

In order to grasp the full significance of Alcibiades the god as the solution to the political problem, it is necessary to juxtapose the Platonic Alcibiades with the historical Alcibiades.[344] I will thus briefly present the most important features of his life. Our main sources for information about Alcibiades are Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War*,

---

toward Socrates" (222c). The impression that his speech creates is one of interest in Socrates rather than Agathon. And if we attend to what he says, we see that he must have an abiding interest in Socrates, and especially in the beauty inherent in his speeches. He did indeed come to praise Socrates, and his need to praise him is an expression of his own eros for the beautiful.

[343] See p. 11 above.

[344] This is in no way to imply that the historical Alcibiades constitutes the standard against which the Platonic Alcibiades must be interpreted. For as I have observed above (see pp. 244-245), the Platonic dialogues are radically fictitious, and as such themselves provide the reader with everything that is required for their interpretation. Yet a Greek reader of *Symposium* would know things about Greek life that Plato could take for granted, and so we must try to recover these things, things that were then common knowledge, in order fully to understand the dialogues. Plato's Alcibiades does not begin as a mere name (unlike his Diotima), but would rather inevitably conjure images in the minds of his readers. Plato understood this. When he uses historical characters, he uses history as a device to deepen the drama of his dialogues. But he uses them as it suits his purpose; many of his characters come from history, but many do not. It is entirely a matter of his own choice. Moreover, when he chooses his characters from history, he has all history from which to choose. His use of historical characters does not render his dialogues 'historical'.

Xenophon's *Hellenica*, Plutarch's "Alcibiades" in his *Greek Lives*, and Diodorus' *Library of History*.

Alcibiades was a man of surpassing beauty. This, combined with the fact that he was born of a noble and wealthy family, and that – upon his father's death – Pericles became his guardian, naturally contributed to his early and meteoric rise in Athenian politics (Plutarch,1). When he was first elected general (*strategós*), he was one of the youngest ever to hold that position. He then reinvigorated popular support for expanding the Athenian empire, which had waned with the death of Pericles, and escalated the war against Sparta (Thucydides, V 40-48). His adeptness at diplomatic *manoeuvre* and intrigue (Plutarch, 14-15), and his rhetorical skill (Plutarch, 10), was unparalleled. His main political rival was the much older Nicias, of whom he always seemed to get the better. He made him look foolish in the Athenian Assembly (Thucydides, V 45-46; Plutarch, 14-15). When the Sicilian expedition was being debated in the Assembly, the cautious and conservative Nicias opposed it, hoping to discourage the Assembly by emphasizing the prohibitively great expense that the expedition must involve if were to have any hope of success. But his tactic backfired: Alcibiades' rhetoric swept up the Assembly to such an extent that Nicias' words rather caused the Assembly to increase the expenditure on the expedition, i.e., they served – contrary to his intention – as an argument in favour of a vastly expanded expedition (Thucydides, VI 8-25). Alcibiades assumed control of this expedition in a troika with Nicias and Lamachus that was accorded virtually unlimited powers (Thucydides, VI 26; Plutarch, 18).

However, on the eve of the expedition, the Hermae, popular religious icons, were desecrated. Alcibiades was accused of being behind this. The accusation was believable because of his apparently profligate life-style, and his generally hubristic and impious disposition. He was rumoured to have earlier profaned the Eleusian Mysteries. The desecration of the Hermae put the Athenians into a kind of frenzied state, which was fanned by demagogic enemies of Alcibiades for their own political advantage. They said it was part of a larger tyrannical scheme to overthrow the democracy. Alcibiades wanted to face these charges before he left, but his enemies – fearing his ability to defend himself, and the natural advantage his place in the pending Sicilian expedition accorded him – arranged it so that he was forced to leave (along with thousands of his supporters) before he could do so (Thucydides, VI 27-29; Plutarch, 19-21; Diodorus, XIII 2.1-4). When he was in Sicily he was either recalled by the Athenian Assembly to face the charges, or tried in absentia and condemned to death. In any event, he was relieved of his command, and ordered to return to Athens (Thucydides, VI 53; Plutarch, 21).

Preferring not to return to Athens, he instead made his way to Sparta, and offered the Spartans his services (Thucydides, VI 88; Plutarch, 23). He advised them to support the Sicilians and fortify the garrison at Declea in Attica, which were both sound pieces of advice, especially the latter (Thucydides, VI 89-93; Plutarch, 23). Although in Athens he had a reputation for a profligate lifestyle, while in Sparta he became renowned among the Spartans for his great moderation, and 'spartan' life-style, which quickly made him popular with the people there. Evidently, he had sufficient self-mastery to adapt himself to whatever the circumstances required. However, he seduced and impregnated the Spartan Queen, which – not surprisingly – drew the ire of the Spartan king (Plutarch, 23). His execution was later ordered by Spartan authorities (Thucydides, VIII 45; Plutarch, 24).

Alcibiades then offered his services to the Persian satrap Tissaphernes. He convinced him to pursue a policy of using Persian power to keep Spartan and Athenian power equally balanced, as it was in the interest of Persia for the Greeks to exhaust themselves in war (Thucydides, VIII 45-47; Plutarch, 23-24). His service on both sides of the war, and then with the Persians, gave him the appearance of the arbiter of Greek affairs. The Athenians began to speak of recalling him. He promoted an oligarchic revolution in Athens, but then failed to support the oligarchic government that came to power (Thucydides, VIII 53-54; Plutarch, 25-26). Instead he was elected general of the Athenian army at Samos, and began an opposition to the Athenian oligarchy that solidified his control over the army and gained him the favour of the Athenian people (Thucydides, VIII 81-82; Plutarch, 26-27). In his new position, he greatly increased the power of Athens – especially with major victories at Abydus and Cyzicus, and the establishment of an important base in Chalchedonia – and virtually drove the Spartans from the seas. (Xenophon, I(i)4-22; Plutarch, 27-28; Diodorus, 49-52). Mistrusting his new power, Tissaphernes got hold of him and imprisoned him, but he escaped a month later (Xenophon, I(i) 9-10; Plutarch, 27-28).

The government of the Five Thousand, a new mixed regime in Athens, voted to recall him (Thucydides, 97), and he soon returned in triumph to Piraeus (Xenophon, I(iv) 12-19; Plutarch, 32). Back in Athens, he was proclaimed General-in-Chief with absolute authority. And he redeemed himself for his alleged profanation of the Eleusian Mysteries in the following manner. As his first act in power, he conducted by land a procession of the Eleusian Mysteries, which for many years previously had been conducted by ship for fear of the Spartan land forces. This won him the favour of the pious. (Xenophon, I(iv) 20-21; Plutarch, 34). However, the Athenians proved to be fickle. Alcibiades lost a battle at Notium, due to the disobedience of one of his officers, and the Athenians elected ten new generals (Xenophon, I(v) 11-16; Plutarch, 35).

He withdrew to a private castle he had built for himself in Thrace (Xenophon, I(v) 17; Plutarch, 36). Later, when the entire Athenian fleet was vulnerably berthed at nearby Aegospotami, he tried to tell the generals that they were at risk, but was rebuffed. Not heeding his advice, the Athenians lost all but eight of their ships, and this proved to be the final nail in the coffin of the Athenian empire (Plutarch, 37). He was assassinated not long after, either by agents of Sparta or the brothers of a woman he had seduced (Plutarch, 39).

We can read in Plato's *Symposium* all the salient features of the story of the life of Alcibiades. His surpassing beauty, his adeptness at political intrigue and rhetoric, and hence his consummate political skill, are all present here. But his political career – still ahead of him in 416 – was, to say the least, 'colourful'. The picture that emerges from history is ambiguous; although he had the very greatest potential, he never fully realized it. He was an apparently selfish man who pursued his own interests, and who revelled in his own private pleasures. One could easily suspect him of tyrannical ambitions, and he did betray his country. It is easy to see why the Athenians might have blamed Socrates for his corruption. What is the point of great political skill and power if it never issues in any politically salutary conclusion that lasts? So, does it really make sense to see in such a man the solution to the political problem?

Perhaps, however, there were good reasons beyond anyone's control that account for his lack of ultimate political success. Chance plays an irreducible role in politics. It must be acknowledged that factionalism and viciousness were everywhere in the larger political situation within which he operated. To some extent, they always are. One could say that he was merely doing what he had to in order to survive. As for his apparent willingness to indulge his own private pleasures at the public expense, which gave credence to fears of his tyrannous ambitions, one could say that Alcibiades simply personified the ambitions of most Athenian citizens, which made them admire him, even if grudgingly. His profligate lifestyle 'made a splash' in Athens, and raised his public profile, which is an important ingredient of success in any democracy. But he proved he could just as easily discard it when he needed to, as he did in Sparta.

Yet still, if we are to see the political solution in a man, can we really believe that the solution works if the man is only doing what he has to in order to survive, or if he is motivated by nothing higher than his own self-interests? The answer to this question turns entirely on the issue of how we see the self-interest. If we judge every self-interest as the same, then the answer is clearly no. But there is no reason to suppose that every self-interest is the same. For this supposition is based on nothing more than a prejudice, the fundamental democratic prejudice that every self is equal. The *evidence* for a natural hierarchy of men is everywhere we look, if only we are willing to look. If the value of every self is not the same, then neither is the value of every self-interest, and, more particularly, neither is every self-interest of equal value *for politics*. Clearly, the pursuit of some self-interests may conduce more, others less, to the good of the city. Alcibiades had the greatest gifts of both nature and nurture, which meant that he stood head and shoulders above his contemporaries. The self-interest that he pursued was evidently his own political power and glory (*Alcibiades I* 105a-c; *Alcibiades II* 150c). But, as a result of the education he received from Socrates (as depicted in *Alcibiades I* and *II*), his conception of what constitutes true political greatness was altered and deepened, and hence so too was his conception of his own political power and glory. This is not to suggest that the Socratic education turned Alcibiades angelic. Angels are not what is required. The solution to political problems requires men who can fight and win political battles, which are often quite nasty. Simply good men cannot do this, and still preserve their goodness. Socrates, a good man who was brought to capital trial by vicious men serving their own petty interests, said at his trial:

> For know well, men of Athens, if I had long ago attempted to be politically active, I would long ago have perished, and I would have benefited neither you nor myself. Now do not be vexed with me when I speak the truth. For there is no human being who will preserve his life if he genuinely opposes either you or any other multitude and prevents many unjust and unlawful things from happening in the city. Rather, if someone who really fights for the just is going to preserve himself even for a short time, it is necessary for him to lead a private rather than a public life. (*Apology* 31d-a)

Inflexibly 'good' men perish in politics. But if a man is to accomplish any good, he must be able to preserve his life. And if he is to do this, he cannot always and adamantly oppose the multitude, and he cannot prevent many unjust and unlawful things from happening in the city. It follows that a politically active man must acquiesce in many unjust and unlawful things if he is to preserve himself in order to do good. There is a sense, then, in which apologies for Alcibiades like those found in the above paragraph really miss the point. We need politically active men, but we have to recognize that, precisely because they are politically active, they must be less than perfect. Plato is really much more the realist than the idealist.

Politically active men cannot be simply and unqualifiedly good men as ordinarily understood; they must rather be 'as good as the circumstances allow ', as Machiavelli so insight fully observed:

> For a man who wants to make a profession of good in all regards must come to ruin among so many who are not good. Hence, it is necessary to a prince, if he wants to maintain himself, to learn to be able not to be good, and to use this and not use it according to necessity. (*The Prince* Ch XV, 1st para)

This might sound like a rationalization for political vice, but it is merely a recognition of the demands that successful politics make on men, and hence an indication of the psyche that is required for successful politics. And men can indeed be remarkably good in the very worst of circumstances. The greatest practical good is the good that is attainable here and now. And Alcibiades always managed to attain the greatest practical good for the polity he employed. For however ambiguous the historical record as regards Alcibiades may appear, one point that clearly emerges from all the historical sources is that, no matter what political entity with which he aligned himself, its political fortunes always dramatically improved as a result. Probably, he could have accomplished more had fortune been more on his side. As Machiavelli again so insightfully observed, fortune has a great influence on politics (*The Prince* Ch XXV). In Plato's *Republic*, the only enduring political solution, the political rule of philosophers, requires a chance union of politics and philosophy: it requires that one who rules happens to be a philosopher, or that one who philosophises happens to rule (473c-e). As such, the political 'solution' of *Republic* is no solution at all, but rather is meant to elucidate the nature of the political problem; this elucidation shows that the solution to the political problem is beyond good fortune: it would require a well-nigh miracle. The *practical* political solution is given in *Symposium*, which is the sister dialogue to *Republic*. The practical political solution merely requires extraordinary good fortune. It also depends on a chance union of politics and philosophy, which is captured dramatically by the union of Alcibiades and Socrates. This union is, however, different from that in *Republic*: the ruler does not actually live to philosophise, and the philosopher does not live to rule. Rather, the ruler merely happened to have received an abortive education from a philosopher, in that it fell short of turning him permanently to philosophy. Because there is no simple union of power and wisdom in the rule of the practical political solution, it is much more open to the continuing vagaries of fortune. The Philosopher-King of *Republic* is able to secure his rule and protect the laws and practices of the city with a kind of skilful surety precisely because he is wise (484b). But the practical rulers, lacking wisdom, will need to have a little luck instead. The frustrated rule of Alcibiades merely confirms this point. God-like Alcibiades, the student of the philosopher Socrates, had too much bad luck, and, as a consequence, he never accomplished any lasting political greatness. By contrast, god-like Alexander, the student of the philosopher Aristotle, had better luck, and accomplished much of lasting political value. He conquered virtually the entire known world. In the process, he Hellenised much of it, and it could certainly be argued that in this way he elevated humanity. There is, however, a more troubling sense in which luck plays a role in the practical political solution. There is no guarantee that its chance union of politics and philosophy – the abortive philosophic education of the ruler – will result in a ruler who is politically good. Socrates educated two rulers, Critias and Alcibiades, but one of them never profited politics anything, and turned out to be vicious (Xenophon, II(iii-iv)). The fact is that men like Critias, Alcibiades, and Alexander, precisely because they are both great and unwise, are inherently dangerous. The practical political solution involves great danger. But in any worthwhile endeavour, one cannot provide first of all for the avoidance of risk; rather, those risks must be hazarded, which – if we emerge successfully from them – make us better (*Republic* 467b). This is again a reflection of Platonic realism.

11 Conclusion

Symosium tells a story about the origin of politics, the sources of their decline, and the possibilities for their renewal. The story is told in erotic terms: it presents at least six or seven different perspectives on eros, which represent a broad range of its manifold diversity – possibly the full range. This presentation shows us the political significance of various manifestations of human eros, and in this way provides a teaching about the erotic basis of politics. We have seen that eros can implant a sense of shame in the face of shameful things, and honourable ambition in the face of the beautiful things, and that it can thus lead to (demotic) virtue, and that this promotes politics, or, more particularly, beautiful politics, which attract men to them. But it can also lead to shamelessness and baseness. While the city is dependent upon eros for its continued existence, it remains always a threat to civic order. For this reason, the laws governing erotic relations are literally foundational, and a comparison of actual regimes shows that they have a defining effect upon the city as a whole. But the laws are made by men, who do not necessarily have the interests of the whole at heart when they make them. This is especially true of men who equate the good with pleasure, since eros for pleasure tends to be individuating, and to thus cut one off from the whole. Consequently, as the laws are manifestly directed to the good of the whole, arguments about laws made by men dominated by eros for pleasure are naturally sophistical. As we have seen, eros for pleasure issues in materialism and technicism designed to satisfy it, and the technologist himself is characterized by eros for raw power. This is dehumanising, as it leads an understanding of man as matter, rather than man as man, and the specialization inherent in technicism has a stunting or perverting effect on man. As a consequence, eros for pleasure leads to politics that tend to acquire a rather ugly aspect. The erotic tendency that counters this is the love of our own which causes us to beautify what is our own, in an effort to make what is our own better than it really is. We naturally do this with all that is our own, beginning with our own bodies, but including our own lovers, our own families, and, finally, the city whose laws guarantee the family and make secure the possession of what is our own. The city is at bottom nothing more that a beautified extension of the body, and politics thus cannot be adequately understood apart from an adequate understanding of beauty and our erotic attraction to it. Yet beauty itself can be contra politics. It seems to be especially closely associated with the young, who are naturally rebellious. The 'newness' that goes with youthful beauty predisposes the young to innovation, which is – to the extent that it undercuts established traditions – a force for political degeneration. Moreover, eros for beauty that is divorced from one's own can undermine politics inasmuch as politics are essentially concerned with what is one's own, or inasmuch as it leads to a supra-political orientation that undermines the significance of the political. This eros for the beautiful situates man in a natural world that is much wider than the political world in which he lives his day-to-day life, which tends to render him foolishly apolitical.

If we examine all of the erotic sources of political sickness and of political health in *Symposium*, we see that the sources of health support the gods of the city, whereas the sources of sickness undermine them. The political story of *Symposium* is, at root, a story about the gods: the quality of politics ebbs and flows with the quality of the city's gods. We have seen that the practical solution to the political problem is found in the character of Alcibiades as god. But the viability of this solution was seen to be critically dependent on his connection to Socrates and philosophy. The political solution depends upon the continued existence of philosophy. It is thus fitting to conclude this study of Plato's *Symposium* with a consideration of the manner in which philosophy is propagated.

Philosophy is propagated through pederasty. The importance of this theme within *Symposium* is indicated by the fact that every encomiast save for the self-centred Agathon addresses the proper practice of pederasty (*orthös paiderasteîn*), in one fashion or another (e.g., 178c-b, 181c-a, 186b-c, 191e-c, 209b-212a, 216d-219e). The two most sustained and explicit arguments for pederasty are, however, those of Pausanius and Socrates. One is sophistical, and one is philosophical, but both associate pederasty with philosophical activity. The juxtaposition of Socrates and Pausanius brings to light a problem that Socrates has, which is, as I have said, one way to understand the political problem that philosophy has: people cannot adequately distinguish sophistry and philosophy.[345] To the vast majority of people, they *sound* alike, and they *appear* alike: Pausanius and Socrates are both pederasts. Consequently, they both incur the wrath of fathers, and so both must try to defend themselves against it. Pausanius attempts to do so with his legal arguments, Socrates with his ironic dialogue and rhetoric. In the end this was not enough for Socrates: the accusation that he corrupted the young constituted part of the capital charge for which he was tried (*Apology*, 24b). There is something about Socrates' philosophic activity that required him to spend an inordinate amount of time with the young, which people are apt to regard as suspicious behaviour, and generally for good reason. This is why the charge against him was credible: anyone who spends time with the young is suspect because people cannot distinguish the 'high' Uranian pederast from the 'low' pandemian pederast, to use Pausanius' language. The distinction between sophist and philosopher is analogous to the distinction between the low and high pederast.

---

[345] See pp. 79-82 above.

In the Platonic dialogue depicting the trial of Socrates, *Apology of Socrates*, Socrates speaks in a law court, a political institution, before over 500 jurors; he is compelled to render an account of himself, in broad daylight, before a wide plurality of Athenian citizens. This makes *Apology* the most overtly political Platonic dialogue. There are two parts to the capital charge against Socrates: that he corrupts the young, and that he does not believe in the gods that the city believes in, and introduces novel *daimonia*. The trial depicts the conflict between politics and philosophy, between the city and the philosopher. It shows us an unavoidable – hence permanent – conflict, and the substance of the charge shows us what in particular it is about the philosopher's essential activity that brings him into conflict with the city. I have already addressed the issue of why philosophy must question the gods, and why this must harm the city. But why must the philosopher engage in pederasty, and why is this necessarily harmful to the city?

In addressing these questions, it is useful to begin by taking recourse to *Symposium's* sister dialogue, *Republic*. Immediately after Socrates speaks the famous central teaching of *Republic* concerning philosophical rule (473c-e), his main interlocutor, Glaucon, observes that this suggestion is so utterly outrageous that Socrates can expect to be attacked by many. But Socrates claims that he can defend himself by distinguishing who he means by the philosophers, and by "showing that it is by nature fitting for them both to engage in philosophy and to lead a city, and for the rest not to cling to it and to follow the leader" (474c). In distinguishing these true philosophers, the first thing he does is explain what it means when we say of a man that he loves something ('philosophy', of course, literally means 'love of wisdom', 474c-475c). According to Socrates, one who *truly* loves something, loves all of it. He gives four examples to illustrate his point: one who truly loves boys, wine, honour, or food, loves all boys, all wine, all honour, or all food. The genuine philosopher, who is a true lover of wisdom, desires *all* wisdom, and so is insatiable for learning. For Socrates, the quality of love inheres primarily in its *un*qualified, i.e., *in*discriminatory, nature. Distinguishing the true philosopher in this manner is the beginning of his defence against those attackers Glaucon warns of, because the one who loves the whole of wisdom in this unqualified fashion turns out to be the most excellent man, and so too the most fit to rule (485a-487a).

Now, it is a curious thing that Socrates himself is *not* a true lover, *not* an unqualified lover in the sense identified, of any of the four things he uses to illustrate what he means by true or unqualified love. Alcibiades' eulogy to Socrates at the end of *Symposium* shows conclusively that Socrates cannot be a true lover of boys (217a-219d), wine (214a and 220a with 176c), honour (220d-e), or food (219e-a). He does not simply indulge in each of these things as opportunity affords, as he would if he were a true lover of them, but rather he *discriminates* among each one of them. To focus on the issue at hand, his love of boys (which is the literal meaning of pederasty), Alcibiades made a simple and unambiguous offer of himself to Socrates, who declined. He cannot therefore be a true lover of boys.

Yet the Platonic dialogues taken as a whole show Socrates was, at the least, very much interested in boys: in his many dialogues about the nature things which Plato depicts, he is, more often than not, in dialogue with the young, and when he talks with adults, it is often about the young. But the dialogues as a whole also show that his interest in the young is highly selective. A close inspection of Alcibiades' account shows the same thing, for in showing that Socrates is not a true lover of boys, it simultaneously shows him to be a *discriminating* lover of boys; Alcibiades' account shows us this discriminating love in action. As the mature Alcibiades remembers his youth, he was very impressed with his own bodily charms. But as he experienced

Socrates' discriminating love, his bodily charms counted for nothing. In ignoring those charms, Socrates nevertheless persisted in his pursuit of what was best in Alcibiades. As he tells the story, Socrates kept engaging him in speech throughout this experience, challenging him to think less of his body and more of his soul. His soul is what Socrates was really interested in. Discrimination is an act of soul, and Socratic discrimination among boys is in respect of soul. The indiscriminate boy lover would be a lover more precisely of boys' bodies. When Socrates describes the boy lover to illustrate what he means by an indiscriminate, hence genuine lover, he says of him:

> You praise the boy with a snub nose by calling him 'cute'; the hook nose of another you say is 'kingly'; and the boy between these two is 'well-proportioned'; the dark look 'manly'; and the white are 'children of the gods'. And as for the 'honey-coloured', do you suppose their very name is the work of anyone other than a lover who renders sallowness endearing and easily puts up with it if it accompanies the bloom of youth? And, in a word, you people take every advantage of every excuse and employ any expression so as to reject none of those who glow with the bloom of youth. (474d-e)

The true boy lover is a lover of boy's bodies, of *all* bodies, and so he uses his rational soul to find reasons to *avoid* discriminating amongst them.

Alcibiades' account shows that Socrates actually does what Pausanius implicitly claims to: discriminate in boy loving on the basis of qualities of soul. Socrates is actually the ideal or 'high' pederast that Pausanius describes. Whereas one suspects that Pausanius is the true lover of boys (á la *Republic*). We can imagine how Pausanius would have responded to Alcibiades' overtures. The man who so emphatically eulogized the ideal would, in the event, think nothing of it. Whereas the man who said nothing of the ideal does, in the event, abide by it.

Why is that? And what exactly does the issue of Socrates' pederastic practices have to do with philosophy? Given the evidently large role that his discriminating love of boys played in the total economy of his life, we can assume that it had some essential connection to his philosophic activity. In order to see what this connection was, it is necessary to consider his discriminating love of boys in terms that are not born of Pausanius' pederastic perspective. The Platonic dialogue that provides the most extensive and fullest presentation of Socrates' discriminating pederastic practices is the little dialogue *Theages*, traditionally subtitled 'On Wisdom'. This dialogue should, accordingly, provide a perspective on pederasty that comes closer to Plato's own perspective than does that expressed by his Pausanius.

In order to see what *Theages* teaches us about Socrates' particular pederastic practices, it is necessary briefly to sketch it. The dialogue shows us Socrates' seductive charm in action, and it shows us something about the way that Socrates discriminates among boys. I will concentrate on the latter in the following sketch. In the dialogue, Socrates encounters a boy, Theages, and his father. We soon discover that Theages 'wishes to become wise'. The father is anxious about his son; in particular, he is anxious that his son not get mixed up with some undesirable sophist, or 'wise guy'. So he seeks council from Socrates as to what should be done with the boy. He evidently has a high opinion of Socrates; at any rate, he does not consider him to be a sophist. The boy, for his part, certainly does have a very high opinion of Socrates, for on the basis of what he knows from other boys who have associated with him, he seems to be the ultimate 'wise guy'. Father and son are united in their respect for Socrates, though clearly for different reasons, and so they both wish to hear his opinion concerning what the boy wants. Socrates begins by questioning the boy as to what he means by 'wise'. But the surprising thing that results from this questioning is that the boy reveals he wants to rule as a king or a tyrant. Now Theages is later identified, in *Republic*, as one of the select few who are fit "to keep company with philosophy in a way that's worthy", i.e., be genuinely philosophic (496a-b). We can assume that Socrates accepted Theages as a pupil, and that his education was a total success. He discriminated well in the case of Theages. Moreover, because he did so on the basis of a conversation that occurred in the presence of Theages' father and in apparent consultation with the father, and because the father was initially well disposed to Socrates, there is no possibility that Socrates' acceptance of Theages as a student could cause any animosity on the part of the father. In sum, *Theages* gives us a presentation of completely successful Socratic pederasty.

But how did Socrates discriminate Theages? What was it about the boy Theages that showed potential as a student, and how was Socrates able to discern this quality in him? He must have discerned it while questioning him as to what he means by 'wise' – that questioning did not really seem to show much about the nature of wisdom, but rather seemed mainly to show something about Theages' soul: his political ambition. I draw two conclusions from this. Socrates discriminates among boys on the basis of how they stand to politics; he loves boys who have souls that are naturally drawn to politics. Given that Theages is later identified as a philosopher, it is reasonable to assume that it is from among those who are attracted to politics that one is most likely to find those few souls who are naturally well suited to philosophy. This is of course consistent with *Republic's* central teaching, for one who is fit to *rule* a city must indeed have a soul that is naturally drawn to politics.

This conclusion is closely related to the dialogue's teaching on wisdom. Whereas Socrates' question and answer exchange with Theages as to what the boy means by 'wise' does not really elucidate the nature of wisdom, it nevertheless *exemplifies* Socrates' own special wisdom, the one thing in which he is expert: *erotica* (*Symposium* 177d; *Theages* 128b). For the questioning shows Theages to have a soul that is naturally drawn to politics, and it is at least possible that 'erotic' wisdom consists precisely in knowing how to discern and then cultivate such souls, which would then imply that such wisdom consists in knowing the proper practice of pederasty. As for why it is that we might believe such a proposition, the continuing existence of philosophy requires a continuing 'procreation' of philosophers. Knowledge of how to discriminate in boy loving is the knowledge whereby to recognize and cultivate suitable candidates. We could say, provisionally, that this makes it the highest kind of knowledge.

The concern that philosophers have for the continuing existence of philosophy is erotic as Diotima conceives of the erotic. According to her, erotic beings generally are preserved:

> not by being entirely the same forever, as the divine is, but by the fact of that which is departing and growing old leaving behind another young thing that is as it was. By this mechanism, Socrates, the mortal shares in immortality, both body and all the rest; but the immortal is otherwise. (208a-b)

The philosopher's way of 'leaving behind another' is to find suitable boys and educate them. This is pederasty. Since the purpose of the education is to make the boy genuinely philosophical, the education – which requires the radical questioning of all opinions, even the most sacred – tends to undermine all normal bonds between the boy and the city. From the perspective of fathers and of the city as a whole, philosophy in effect simply steals its boys. This is why the conflict between politics and philosophy in respect of boys is unavoidable, and hence permanent: as long as their erotic natures cause them to love their own, they will resent the one who takes their boys. The true *political* philosopher, with his erotic wisdom, understands this, and so attempts to propagate philosophy so far as possible in a 'polite' way, thereby harmonizing so far as possible the interests of both philosophy and the polity upon which it is dependent.[346]

In order really to understand what pederasty is, one must try to understand it from the perspective of the philosopher. Of course, to do so would require that one actually be a philosopher. Nonetheless, Diotima tries to provide us with an account of what it must be like for a philosopher:

> So whenever someone from youth onward is pregnant in his soul with these virtues, if he is divine and of a suitable age, then he desires to give birth and produce offspring. And he goes round in search, I believe, of the beautiful in which he might generate; for he will never generate in the ugly. So it is beautiful bodies rather than ugly ones to which he cleaves because he is pregnant; and if he meets a beautiful, generous and naturally gifted soul, he cleaves strongly to the two (body and soul) together. And to this human being he is at once fluent in speeches about virtue – of what sort the good man must be and what he must pursue – and he tries to educate him. So in touching the one who is beautiful, I suppose, and in association with him, he engenders and gives birth to offspring with which he was long pregnant. [209b-c]

The offspring that the philosopher *really* desires to procreate are the same virtues that he has nourished in his own soul. This requires another beautiful person in which he can generate them. When he finds this beautiful person, he does so by educating him with speeches about virtue. In this way, he (in the best case) produces another philosopher. But it is essential to understanding the eros of the philosopher to see that the potential new philosopher, the beautiful person, as Diotima describes it here, is not the object of his eros.[347] The object is rather to give birth to the virtues that may be nourished in a genuinely beautiful soul. This is the essence of the philosophic education as described by Diotima. Since the boys that the philosopher educates were chosen by him in the first place because they have souls possibly suited to philosophy, and since the few who actually turn out to have souls suited to philosophy are being educated in the best conceivable fashion, all this tends naturally to the production of the occasional philosophers, and what is equally important politically, 'gentlemen' who are friendly to philosophy, hence susceptible to its beneficial, harmonizing influence. Yet there is no *necessity* to this. The connection between the erotic activity of a philosopher and the production of his offspring is not direct in the sense that the connection between the erotic activity of a man and woman and the production of their offspring is. Thus, nothing guarantees that philosophy will continue to exist for as long as potential philosophers continue to exist, or for as long as humanity continues to exist.

---

[346] *Republic* shows Socrates doing so in an exemplary manner.

[347] Dio: "For eros is not, Socrates, of the beautiful, as you believe."
Soc: "Well, what then?"
Dio: "It is of engendering and bringing to birth in the beautiful." (206e)

Bibliography

Text and Translations

Of all the English translations of Plato's *Symposium* that I have examined, I have found Seth Benardete's to be the most faithful to the original Greek. All quotes from the dialogue are thus from his translation, though at times altered by my own minor emendations. My source for the original Greek was mainly Kenneth Dover's *Plato: Symposium*, although I deferred to John Burnet's 1901 Oxford text. As it is often useful to consult alternate translations (because it can stimulate fresh thinking), I have included other translations I have read here.

Benardete, Seth, transl. *Symposium* in *The Dialogues of Plato.* Eric Segal ed. New York: Bantam, 1986.

Bury, R. G., ed. *The Symposium of Plato* 2nd ed. Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1973

Burnet, John. *Platonis Opera* Vol 2. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1901

Cobb, William S. *Plato's Erotic Dialogues.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994

Crane, Gregory, Editor-in-Chief. *The Perseus Digital Library.* Tufts University, http://www.perseus.tufts.edu

Dover, Kenneth. *Plato's* Symposium. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1980

Groden, Suzy Q., transl. *The Symposium of Plato.* Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1970.

Hamilton, Walter, transl. *The Symposium of Plato.* London: Penguin, 1951

Jowett, Benjamin, transl. *Plato: Symposium and Phaedrus.* New York: Dover, 1993

Nehamas, Alexander and Woodruff, Paul, tranls *Plato: Symposium.* Indianapolis: Hacket, 1989

Selected Works

The following is a list of works I have consulted in one capacity or another in my study of Plato's *Symposium*, and which the reader may find useful in understanding the dialogue. It does not include the classics of our tradition that I have consulted (such as the dialogues of Plato and Xenophon, the treatises of Aristotle and Hegel, or the aphorisms of Bacon and Nietzsche), unless a specific edition has been referred to.

Anderson, Daniel E. *The Masks of Dionysos: A Commentary of Plato's* Symposium. Albany: State University of New York , 1993

Arieti, James. *Interpreting Plato: The Dialogues as Drama.* Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991

Aristophanes: The Eleven Comedies (anonymous transl). New York: Liveright Publishing Corp, 1943.

Bacon, Helen H. "Socrates Crowned" *Virginia Quarterly Review* 33 no. 3 (1959)

Bacon, Francis. *The New Organon.* Fulton H. Anderson, ed. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1984.

– *Essays.* Michael J. Hawkins, ed. London: Everyman, 1994

Barabas, Marina. "The Strangeness of Socrates" *Philosophical Investigation* 9 no. 2 (1986)

Bartlett, Robert C., transl. "Symposium" in *Xenophon: The Shorter Socratic Writings.* ed. Robert C. Bartlett. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996.

Benardete, Seth. *On Plato's* Symposium. Munich: Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung, 1994

Bloom, Allan. *Love and Friendship.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993

– *The Closing of the American Mind.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987

– *Giants and Dwarfs: Essays, 1960-1990.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990

– transl. *The Republic of Plato.* New York: Basic Books, 1968

Bonnette, Amy L., transl. *Xenophon: Memorabilia.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984

Breazeale, Daniel, ed., Hollingdale, R. J., transl., *Frederich Nietzsche: Untimely Meditations.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p 97

Brownson, Carleton L. *Xenophon: Hellenica, Book I-IV.* New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1930

Burger, Ronna "Socratic *eironia*" *Interpretation,* 13(2), 1985

Corrigan, Kevin and Glasov-Corrigan, Elena. *Plato's Dialectic at Play.* Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 2004.

Cornford, F. M. "The Doctrine of Eros in Plato's *Symposium*" in *The Unwritten Philosophy*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1950

Coxon, A. H., transl. *The Fragments of Parmenides*. Assen: Van Gorcum & Comp, 1986

Craig, Leon Harold *The War Lover: A Study of Plato's* Republic. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994

– revised transl. *Plato: Protagoras*. Unpublished.

Dover, Kenneth "The Date of Plato's *Symposium*" *Phronesis*, 10, 1965

– "The Significance of the Speeches in Plato's *Symposium*" *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 2(4), 1969

Edelstein, L. "The Role of Eryximachus in Plato's *Symposium*" *American Philological Association Transactions and Proceedings*, 82, 1962

Gagarin, Michael "Socrates' *Hybris* and Alcibiades Failure" *Phoenix* 31 (1977)

Gould, Thomas *Platonic Love*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963

Hackforth, R. "Immortality in Plato's *Symposium*" The Classical Review, 64(2), 1950

Halperin, David M. "Platonic Eros and What Men Call Love" *Ancient Philosophy* 5 (1985)

– "Why is Diotima a Woman?" in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love*. New York: Routledge, 1990

Hobbes, Thomas *Leviathan*. Richard Tuck, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999

Hornsby, Roger "Significant Action in the *Symposium*" *The Classical Journal* 52 (1956)

Isenburg, Meyer William *The Order of Discourses in Plato's* Symposium. Chicago: University of Chicago Libraries, 1940

Jayne, Sears R. transl. *Marcilio Ficino's Commentary on Plato's* Symposium. Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 1944

Kass, Leon R., M. D. *Towards a More Natural Science: Biology and Human Affairs*. New York: Macmillan, 1985

Kaufmann, Walter, transl. *The Portable Nietzsche*. New York: Penguin, 1976.

– transl. *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. New York: The Modern Library, 1992

Krentz, Arthur A. "Dramatic Form and Philosophical Context in Plato's Dialogues" *Philosophy and Literature*, 7, 1983

Lattimore, Richmond, transl. *The Odyssey of Homer*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991

Lattimore, Richmond, transl. *The Illiad of Homer*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961

Machiavelli, Niccolò *The Prince*. Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., transl. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.

Moravscik, J. M. E. "Reason and Eros in the Ascent Passage of the *Symposium*" in Anton, John P. and Kustas, George L. eds. *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1971

Murray, Oswyn ed. *Sympotica*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990

Neumann, Harry "Diotima's Concept of Love" *American Journal of Philology* 86 no. 1 (1965)

– "On the Comedy of Plato's Aristophanes" *American Journal of Philology* 87 no. 4 (1966)

Newell, Waller R. *Ruling Passion: The Erotics of Statecraft in Platonic Political Philosophy*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000

Nietzsche, Friedrich *Beyond Good and Evil*. R. J. Hollingdale transl. New York: Penguin, 1990

Nichols, James H., Jr., transl. *Plato: Gorgias*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998

– transl. *Plato: Phaedrus*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998

Nussbaum, Martha "The Speech of Alcibiades: A Reading of Plato's *Symposium*" *Philosophy and Literature* 3 (1979)

Oldfather, C. H., tansl. *Diodorus of Sicily*, Volume V. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933.

Pangle, Thomas, transl. *The Laws of Plato*. New York: Basic Books, 1980

Pangle, Thomas, ed. *The Roots of Political Philosophy: Ten Forgotten Socratic Dialogues*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987

Plochmann, G. K. "Hiccups and Hangovers in the *Symposium*" *Bucknell Review* 11 (1963)

– "Supporting Themes in the *Symposium*" in Anton, John P. and Kustas, George L. eds. *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1971

Post, L. A. transl *Thirteen Epistles of Plato*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925

Price, A. W. *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989

Rosen, Stanley *Plato's Symposium*. 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987

Reeve, C.D.C. "Telling The Truth About Love: Plato's *Symposium*" in *Proceedings of The Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* John J Cleary and William C Wians, eds., Boston: University Press of America, 1994

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques *The Social Contract and Discourses*. G. D. H. Cole, transl. London: Everyman, 1993.

Saxonhouse, Arlene W. "The Net of Hephaestus: Aristophanes' Speech in Plato's *Symposium*" *Interpretation* 13 no. 1 (1985)

Schlager, Neil *Grzimeck's Animal Life Encyclopedia, 2nd Ed., Vol 3, Insects*. Farmington Hills: Gale Group, 2003.

Simpson, Peter Phillips, transl. *The Politics of Aristotle*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997.

Sommerstein, Allan H., transl. *Aristophanes: Peace*. Warminster: Aris & Phillips Ltd, 1985

Strauss, Leo *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten essays by Leo Strauss*. ed. Hilail Gilden. Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1989 p. 233

– *Introduction to Political Philosophy*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989

– *Leo Strauss on Plato's* Symposium. ed. Seth Benardete, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983

– *Liberalism Ancient and Modern.* New York: Basic Books, 1968

– *Platonic Political Philosophy.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983

– *Socrates and Aristophanes.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966

– *The City and Man.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964

– *What is Political Philosophy?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988

Tuana, Nancy, ed. *Feminist Interpretations of Plato.* Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994.

Warner, Rex, transl. *Thucydides: The Peloponesian War.* New York: Penguin Books, 1984

Waterfield, Robin, transl. *Plutarch: Greek Lives.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Versenyi, Laszlo "Dionysus and Tragedy" *Review of Metaphysics* 16 no. 1 (1962)

Vlastos, Gregory "The Individual as Object of Love in Plato" in *Platonic Studies.* 2nd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981

– ed. *The Philosophy of Socrates: A Collection of Critical Essays.* Garden City: Doubleday Anchor, 1971.

West, Thomas G. and West, Grace Starry transls. *Four Texts on Socrates: Plato's Euthyphro, Apology and Crito, and Aristophanes' Clouds.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984

Appendix: The Seating Arrangement

The seating arrangement of *Symposium* proves to be an important element of the overall dramatic structure of the dialogue, and thus constitutes a major interpretive clue for understanding it. As the textual evidence that precisely establishes the seating arrangement is located at various points throughout the dialogue, I have gathered it together in this appendix for ease of reference. The elements of this evidence are listed below, followed by a depiction of the seating arrangement.

1. Agathon tells Aristodemus to lie down beside Eryximachus (175a).

2. Agathon is initially lying at the far end all alone (175c).

3. Agathon tells Socrates to lie down beside him (175c).

4. Eryximachus proposes that each, starting on the left, make a speech in praise of Eros. This implies that there is a right and a left, or that they are not sitting in a circle. Phaedrus begins, because he is at the head couch, and furthest to the left (178d).

5. Following this rule helps us to establish where everybody is sitting in relation to everybody else. Phaedrus sits to the left of the speaker who gives us the next recounted speech, Pausanius. But he does not sit directly next to him: they are separated by an undetermined number of speakers (plural) who Aristodemus could not recall (180c).

6. After Pausanius, it was Aristophanes' turn to speak: Aristophanes sits immediately to the right of Pausanius. But owing to the hiccoughs, he does not. The doctor, who was lying next to Aristophanes (and so to his immediate right), speaks in his stead (186c).

7. Eryximachus says to Aristophanes: "My good Aristophanes, look [*óra*] at what you are *doing* [*poieis*]. You have made us laugh just as you were about to speak " (189a). It seems that they can all see each other. This, together with (4) above, implies that they are sitting in a curve-linear fashion, as in a semi-circle.

8. After Aristophanes, Agathon speaks. Because Eryximachus spoke in Aristophanes' place, this *would* mean that Agathon is to Eryximachus' immediate right, but we already know that Aristodemus (who does not speak and so is easily forgotten, cf. 193d-e) is sitting next to Eryximachus: Aristodemus is sitting to the immediate right of Eryximachus and Agathon is to the immediate right of Aristodemus. Socrates is of course last, and hence to the immediate right of Agathon.

9. When Alcibiades burst in he sits between Agathon and Socrates (213a).

Putting all this together, we arrive at the following seating arrangement:

Phaedrus
unnamed speaker

unnamed speaker
unnamed speaker

Aristophanes
Pausanius

Aristodemus
Eryximachus

Socrates
[Alcibiades]
Agathon